

## LEARNING ORIENTED ASSESSMENT IN COACH EDUCATION

## 1 Abstract

2 As sports coaching continues to professionalise, the demand for and importance placed upon  
3 high-quality education and development programmes for sports coaches is increasing. As a  
4 result, the landscape of provision is changing and there is now a recognition of the key role that  
5 Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) play in the education, development and assessment of sports  
6 coaches. In this insights paper, we argue that since there is a scarcity of research focused solely  
7 on assessment as a feature of coach education programmes, there is something to be gained from  
8 examining how HEIs assess sports coaches. This represents an important contribution to the  
9 research literature, given that assessment is a feature of nearly all coach education programmes  
10 and the attainment of a specific award communicates to stakeholders (e.g., employers, athletes,  
11 parents) that a precise standard of practice has been met. As such, we identify how some HEIs  
12 are addressing the issue of assessment with sports coaches and highlight a series of assessment  
13 principles, alongside practical examples from the literature, which intend to stimulate  
14 conversation in what we argue is an important area of study.

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16 Keywords: assessment strategies, coach assessment, coach learning, higher education, social-  
17 constructivism

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### **The Research Context**

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While sports coaching is societally important, concerns about the quality of coaching practice have grown in recent years (North, 2017). Quality of practice, it is suggested, is connected to the development of sports coaching as a profession (Lyle, 2002; Lyle & Cushion, 2016) and coach education undoubtedly plays a role. Increasingly, this has been recognised by the sports coaching community and coach education is receiving a significant amount of attention (Hay, Dickens, Crudginton, & Engstrom, 2012). As a result, the demand for and importance placed upon coach education has increased. Indeed, Hay et al. (2012) suggest that “acceptance of this reality has been reflected in the investment by sports and sporting organisations in formal and non-formal coach education programs such as coaching workshops, coaching accreditation schemes and tertiary/university-based courses” (p. 188). It is argued, therefore, that coach education programmes are a key feature of a coach’s professional development (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2012). In fact, in many instances, the ability to undertake their role as a coach depends upon it (i.e., coach licensing).

Against this backdrop, there has been notable growth in the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world designing and delivering sport coaching bachelor degree programmes (Kjær, 2019; Lara-Bercial et al., 2016; Trudel, Milestetd, & Culver, 2020). Typically, these programmes involve three to four years of study and prepare students for employment as a sports coach. It could even be argued that the HEI sector is now the largest formal coach education provider, facilitating diverse routes into paid coaching roles (Milstetd, Trudel, Rynne, Mesquita, & do Nascimento, 2018). Indeed, Gano-Overway and Diffenbach (2019) recently identified 308 HEIs in the USA that offer courses with sports coaching in the

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47 title, while 67,000 students in the UK were enrolled in sport related programs in 2016/17 (HESA,  
48 2020). This has not always been the case, however, as traditionally coach education has been the  
49 exclusive domain of specific sporting NGBs and federations. As one of the many diverse  
50 functions of an NGB (Piggott, 2012), coach education serves as a way to train and certify  
51 coaches in a specific sport, with the intended outcome of growing a coaching workforce able to  
52 meet participant demand. Although these sport-specific and NGB-led coach education  
53 programmes still play a dominant role in a coach's professional development, supplementary  
54 qualifications and accreditation are becoming more widely accepted and play a role in a sports  
55 coach's increasingly blended learning and development journey.

56         The purpose of the present article is to highlight HEIs as a significant contributor to  
57 coach education, while exploring what can be learned from the ways in which they carry out this  
58 work. In the following sections, we “zoom in” on the ways in which NGBs and HEIs undertake  
59 assessment with sports coaches and identify some potential issues and opportunities. Then, we  
60 outline three assessment principles that we believe could enhance the assessment experience and  
61 outcomes for sports coaches, followed by examples of the practical application of each principle  
62 in a HEI context. We recognise that other best practice principles exist (cf. Abraham, Muir, &  
63 Morgan, 2010) and the three we present are by no means the only ones, yet it is beyond the scope  
64 of this paper to consider them all and as such, we have made choices based upon those which we  
65 believe might be most readily adopted and could provide the greatest initial return.

### 66         **Coach Education, Higher Education and Assessment: Issues and Opportunities**

67         Although the field of research concerned with coach education is a maturing one, the  
68 literature to date has predominantly focussed on NGB-led provision. Indeed, a recent review by  
69 Trudel et al. (2020) discovered that just 38 peer-reviewed articles exploring sport coach

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70 education programmes in higher education (HE) have been published since 2000, with 61% of  
71 these articles published much more recently (i.e., between 2015 and 2018). With regard to NGB-  
72 led provision, the research literature has typically taken a disparaging view and is largely  
73 pessimistic about the impact of coach education on coaching practice and the contribution it can  
74 make to coach learning (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Piggott, 2012). The research often highlights  
75 how coaches can find coach education to be far removed from the realities of coaching practice  
76 (Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010; Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003) suggesting that there  
77 exists only a loose fit between coaching practice and coach education. As such, general  
78 criticisms of coach education have led contemporary scholars to suggest a range of different  
79 pedagogical approaches that may remedy some of the concerns expressed within the research;  
80 for example, experiential learning (Cronin & Lowes, 2016) and heutagogical approaches  
81 (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2017). Yet, with such a heavy focus on teaching and learning strategies,  
82 very little attention has been paid to how coaches are assessed, how assessment contributes to  
83 coach learning and the extent to which teaching, learning and assessment strategies are  
84 congruent. To our knowledge, only the work of Hay et al. (2012) considers the matter in any  
85 detail, and they suggest that:

86         Contemporary discussions of learning and pedagogy in formal coach education settings  
87         have underestimated the potential contribution of assessment to the field. We believe that  
88         this is a significant oversight that both fails to recognise key aspects of pedagogy and  
89         learning, and overlooks opportunities for optimising coach and athlete development (p.  
90         189).

91         At the time of writing, coaches enrolled on NGB-led coach education programmes are  
92         most often (with some exceptions) assessed against a set of predetermined observable

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93 competencies (Collins, Burke, Martindale, & Cruickshank, 2015) in endpoint, performative,  
94 ‘high stakes’ scenarios (Harrison, Könings, Schuwirth, Wass, & van der Vleuten, 2017). Indeed,  
95 NGBs (specifically their administrative function) typically seek to ensure that coaches meet or  
96 exceed a specific standard and that those standards are recognised across the wider sector.  
97 Situating assessment within this paradigm suggests a certain a level of confidence that there is  
98 objectivity and rigour in the process, and a strong belief (by both coach, coach educator and  
99 awarding organisation) in the validity of the ‘grade’ awarded, with the feedback provided  
100 helping the student to pass future, similar, assessments (Harrison et al., 2017). However, research  
101 focused specifically on assessment as a feature of coach education is (at the time of writing)  
102 relatively scarce. As a result, little work has been done to move the field beyond the assessment  
103 approach described above. For example, exploring how alternative approaches to assessment  
104 might place greater emphasis on coach learning alongside certification. One of the few pieces of  
105 academic literature which does shine a light on assessment, suggests that “learning-oriented,  
106 authentic, valid and socially just assessment practices have much to offer both coach  
107 accreditation and continuing professional development.” (Hay et al., 2012, p. 196). Nevertheless,  
108 it would seem that conversations about coach education programmes typically overlook issues of  
109 assessment, and instead focus attention on how coaches learn (Mallett, Trudel, Lyle & Rynne,  
110 2009; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) and experience coach education (Piggott, 2012). Of course, this  
111 gap in the scholarly literature may be attributable to the fact that NGBs don’t often study their  
112 assessment practices on coach education programmes; however, the apparent absence of much  
113 critical thought given to assessment practices does suggest that the recent growth in (and focus  
114 on) HEI-led provision represents an opportunity to stimulate greater discussion and collaboration  
115 between the two contexts.

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116           In the following section, we briefly outline a number of assessment principles that we  
117 believe could enhance the assessment experience and outcomes for sports coaches. We present  
118 these from a social-constructivist perspective, since it would appear that many NGBs in  
119 particular are increasingly drawing from this theory of learning to inform their programme  
120 design and delivery (Callary, Culver, Werthner, & Bales, 2014; Chapman, Richardson, Cope, &  
121 Cronin, 2019; Paquette, Hussain, Trudel, & Camiré, 2014; Paquette & Trudel, 2018). Yet, we  
122 must be clear that it is not our intention to advocate any one singular approach, indeed we do  
123 recognise that limited evaluation work has been undertaken to understand the efficacy of not just  
124 coach education underpinned by social-constructivism, but coach education more broadly  
125 (Dohme, Rankin-Wright & Lara-Bercial, 2019; Gilbert & Trudel, 1999 and Cassidy, Potrac &  
126 McKenzie, 2006). Finally, we provide examples of the practical application of each principle in a  
127 HEI context. Consequently, we hope to encourage more carefully considered approaches to the  
128 assessment of sports coaches on coach education programmes broadly, while encouraging debate  
129 within an important but sparse area of coach education research.

### **Assessment as a Feature of Coach Education Programmes: Principles and Examples**

131           Assessment is commonly considered as the practice of making a singular observable  
132 judgment against a piece of work (e.g., a practical performance) at the end of a programme of  
133 study, in a simulated set of circumstances and against well-rehearsed problems (Gervais, 2016).  
134 More recently, however, attitudes toward assessment practices have shifted in some cases and  
135 examples of different approaches to assessment in coach education are beginning to emerge.  
136 Although the assessment of observable competencies still dominates, in some instances this is  
137 supplemented by, and value is now placed upon, coaches' capacity to solve context-specific  
138 problems, develop metacognitive skills such as self-monitoring (Blumenfeld et al., 1991),

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139 collaborate with peers (Adams, 2006; Shepard, 2000), and ultimately value and work toward  
140 expertise (Collins, Burke, Martindale, & Cruickshank, 2015). The ‘drama’ of ‘high stakes’  
141 endpoint assessment (Harrison, et al., 2017) has, on occasion, made way for an approach to  
142 assessment that is divergent in nature, ongoing and often embedded or at least smoothed out  
143 (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). Many of these examples are located in a HEI context and as a result,  
144 we will focus on three principles which we believe have been largely overlooked elsewhere but  
145 could have wider application. It is important to note here that we accept the unique context that  
146 HEIs, NGBs and other organisations responsible for coach education exist within and the range  
147 of affordances they each have. For example, constraining features of these contexts are often  
148 resource-based (i.e., cost and time) (Maclean & Lorimer, 2016). For this reason, we have been  
149 careful to offer practical strategies that we believe can help mitigate these issues.

### 150 **Principle 1: Assessment that is ongoing and embedded**

151 While assessment most typically takes place at the end of coach education programmes,  
152 we argue that a series of ongoing no or low risk assessments embedded within the programme  
153 may bring about desirable outcomes. This principle of assessment practice is not new (cf. Sadler,  
154 1989) but has come to prominence more recently as a rebalancing of the educational debate from  
155 performance to learning has taken place (Adams, 2006). According to Carless (2007),  
156 assessment tasks should “aim to spread attention across a period of study, not lead to short-term  
157 bursts of sustained study” (p. 59). By smoothing out the journey in this way and promoting the  
158 even distribution of effort, there is the potential for a greater connection between the learner and  
159 that which is being learned (Carless, 2007). Adams (2006) argues that not only does this require  
160 a reorientation of the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment, but indeed the  
161 latter should be embedded deeply within the former.

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162           On a Physical Education bachelor’s degree programme at a Brazilian University,  
163 Milistetd et al. (2019) worked with 32 student-coaches over a course of 18 weeks with the goal  
164 of preparing “students to plan and conduct training sessions in team sports” (p. 296). A wide  
165 variety of tools were used to assess the student-coaches, including individual reflective  
166 portfolios, group activities, presentations, the planning and delivery of coaching practice,  
167 reflections (based on video review of one’s own practice) and the observation of others. Student-  
168 coaches reported positive experiences of engaging with the assessment, noting that the ‘ongoing’  
169 nature provided an opportunity to continually assimilate new knowledge and understanding each  
170 week. The authors of the study also noted how ongoing and embedded assessment afforded  
171 student-coaches the opportunity to appreciate the evolution of their own ideas. As such, we  
172 would encourage those tasked with designing and delivering coach education programmes to  
173 consider how, for example, project-based assessment (Bell, 2010; English & Kitsantas, 2013)  
174 might be used to afford coaches the opportunity to curate evidence of learning across the  
175 duration of an entire programme of study. Indeed, this offers coaches the opportunity to seek  
176 regular feedback from a coach educator, self-assess and share their work with others for further  
177 guidance – all prior to the awarding of any ‘grade’.

### 178 **Principle 2: Assessment that is collaborative in nature**

179           If assessment is ongoing and embedded throughout a programme of study, it then  
180 becomes possible to invite others in as part of the process. Social-constructivism, as a theory of  
181 learning, regards stakeholders beyond the traditional teacher-learner dyad as integral to the  
182 learning process. While Black and Wiliam (2009) suggest that peers are a useful instructional  
183 resource, Lave and Wenger (1991) draw attention to the rich and diverse field of actors that play  
184 roles within the learning process. We argue that as teaching, learning and assessment become



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185 integrated this can be true of assessment too. This is consistent with the work of Adams (2006),  
186 who suggests that there is a need to “involve pupils in self and peer assessment through the use  
187 of discursive and collaborative learning and teaching strategies” (p. 253). Further, Woodburn  
188 (2017) suggests that a wide set of stakeholders can play an important role in drawing learners’  
189 attention to feedback they otherwise may have missed, which may be even more relevant for  
190 novice coaches, yet we can all find self-insight a significant challenge (Dunning, 2005).

191 In recent years, examples of this type of collaborative assessment practice have begun to  
192 emerge in HEIs. For example, in a study involving student-coaches from two UK HEIs,  
193 Stoszowski, McCarthy and Fonseca (2017) used online collaborative group blogs  
194 ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)) to capture and assesses learning during a year-long applied sports  
195 coaching module. Over the course of their study, the student-coaches shared their practical  
196 coaching experiences with peers and discussed coaching issues that they faced in the field,  
197 helping each other to resolve the issues as they arose. Alongside this, student-coaches had access  
198 to an online video platform ([www.coach-logic.com](http://www.coach-logic.com)), whereby they could upload video content  
199 from their practice for others to view and comment on in a dialogic review process. The student-  
200 coaches were then graded against a clear and transparent set of success criteria, which  
201 encouraged them to contribute regularly to both platforms in a sufficiently critical manner. In a  
202 follow up study, McCarthy and Stoszowski (2018) concluded that this type of approach to  
203 assessment is particularly efficacious for coaches who are motivated and have prior experience  
204 of being self-determined in their learning. For these reasons, we contend that collaborative online  
205 opportunities using existing Web 2.0 technologies, which often involve no upfront cost to coach  
206 or organisation, would be particularly relevant, especially for experienced coaches (i.e., those  
207 with applied experiences to draw upon) on NGB coach education programmes.

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### 208 **Principle 3: Assessment that meets the needs of a wide variety of motivations and goals**

209 As formal coach education is most commonly criticised for failing to recognise and meet  
210 the needs of individual coaches (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2018;  
211 Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Piggott, 2012), undertaking assessment using a  
212 wider variety of assessment tools might be beneficial. According to Shepard (2000), a “broader  
213 range of assessment tools is needed to capture important learning goals,” and it is recommended  
214 that those tasked with assessment design “devise more open-ended performance tasks to ensure  
215 that students are able to reason critically, to solve complex problems, and to apply their  
216 knowledge in real-world contexts” (p. 8). For example, projects and e-portfolios (Bright, 2016)  
217 are suggested as just two of many tools which can be used to assess learners in a way which is  
218 consistent with this guidance.

219 Within HEIs, a wide range of contemporary tools are being used to assess sports coaches  
220 which consider the variance in motivations and goals of student-coaches, some of which have  
221 begun to appear in the academic literature. Most recently, Stoszkowski, Hodgkinson and Collins  
222 (2020) explored the use of Flipgrid, a video-based online communication tool that enables face  
223 to face, short verbal interactions, as a means to improve collaborative online learning and critical  
224 reflection. A cohort of final year undergraduate student-coaches in the UK used the smartphone-  
225 based app over the course of a 15-week semester to debate coaching topics in relation to their  
226 own coaching contexts and professional practice. Results showed good support for the approach,  
227 with participants exhibiting more frequent and more critical interactions compared to written  
228 response and interaction formats. Stoszkowski, Hodgkinson and Collins (2020) posit that the  
229 short, sharp and electronically enabled communication that mobile based apps such as Flipgrid  
230 offer are more in line with Generation Z individual’s daily experience, therefore providing

231 familiarity and a more natural (or at least student-palatable) means of engaging in reflective  
232 thinking with their peers.

### 233 **Conclusion: What is There to Learn by Exploring these Strategies?**

234 In this insights article we suggest that despite assessment being a feature of nearly all  
235 coach education programmes, approaches to assessment have been largely overlooked and/or  
236 given insufficient consideration (Hay et al., 2012). Secondly, we recognise that there has been a  
237 significant recent growth in HEI-led coach education provision and argue that by directing our  
238 attention towards how assessment is being designed and delivered in this setting, it becomes  
239 possible to move the field forward. Driven by the three principles of assessment that we shine a  
240 light on within this article, we provide practical examples of what we believe to be authentic,  
241 learning-oriented assessment, which might be useful for organisations responsible for coach  
242 education to consider when designing and delivering assessment as part of their programmes.

243 More specifically, we believe it may be fruitful for the coach education community (by  
244 the broadest possible definition) to explore the use of a wider variety of assessment tools and, in  
245 doing so, it may be possible to better meet coaches' diverse range of learning goals and  
246 motivations through more open-ended activities (Shepard, 2000). Furthermore, with a wider  
247 variety of more open-ended assessment methods and activities, it becomes possible to embed  
248 assessment into a coach education programme over a longer period of time, which we argue  
249 might replace the high stakes, endpoint, summative assessments that typify coach education  
250 courses. We believe assessment can be intertwined with and not simply adjunct to, teaching and  
251 learning activities (Adams, 2006). While this not only provides coaches with the opportunity to  
252 assimilate and apply new knowledge on an ongoing basis (Milistetd et al., 2019), it also ensures  
253 that learning and performance insight is generated frequently and, as a result, feedback can be

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254 provided more often to the coach. Finally, if a wider variety of assessment modes are used in an  
255 ongoing and embedded basis, we invite programme designers and deliverers to consider how  
256 assessment could be collaborative in nature. That is to say, assessment where learners achieve  
257 goals through interacting, collaboration and sharing with others (Kokotsaki et al., 2016).

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