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2 Blogs: A Tool to Facilitate Reflection and Community of Practice in Sports Coaching?

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24   Abstract

25   A reflective approach to practice is consistently espoused as a key tool for understanding and

26   enhancing coach learning and raising the vocational standards of coaches. As such, there is a

27   clear need for practical tools and processes that might facilitate the development and

28   measurement of "appropriate" reflective skills. The aim of this preliminary study was to

29   explore the use of online blogs as a tool to support reflection and community of practice in a

30   cohort of undergraduate sports coaching students. Twenty-six students (6 females, 20 males)

31   reflected on their coaching practice via blogs created specifically for reflection. Blogs were

32   subjected to category and content analysis in order to identify the focus of entries and to

33   determine both the emergent reflective quality of posts and the extent to which an online

34   community of practice emerged. Findings revealed that descriptive reflection exceeded that

35   of a critical nature, however, bloggers exhibited a positive trajectory toward higher order

36   thinking and blogs were an effective platform for supporting tutor-student interaction.

37   Despite the peer discourse features of blogs, collaborative reflection was conspicuous by its

38   absence and an online community of practice did not emerge.

39   *Keywords*: coach learning; coach development; reflective practice; virtual; online

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49   Blogs: A Tool to Facilitate Reflection and Community of Practice in Sports Coaching?

50   An increasing body of research is focused on gaining a better understanding of how

51   coaches develop their craft and learn how to coach (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006).

52   Typically, this research has questioned the value, impact, and effectiveness of formal coach

53   education programmes (cf. Cushion et al., 2010). Instead, the majority of coach learning has

54   been shown to occur experientially through a wide and varied range of informal and self-

55   directed learning activities (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-

56   Bush, 2007; Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007). As a result, it has been argued that there is a

57   need for innovative coach education approaches that can better equip coaches with the

58   professional competencies needed to deal with the problematic and dynamic nature of their

59   work (Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne, & Llewellyn, 2013). For example, the language and value

60   of reflection have become increasingly prominent in academic (and professional) coach

61   education programmes. Indeed, a reflective approach to practice is now espoused as a key

62   tool for understanding and enhancing coach learning and raising the vocational standards of

63   coaches (e.g., Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin, 2004; Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Neville, 2001;

64   Lyle & Cushion, 2010).

65   Nevertheless, due to a perceived lack of criticality and an over reliance on superficial

66   and descriptive activities which are, in actual fact, inherently non-reflective as well as

67   susceptible to a range of social influences, numerous authors have drawn attention to the

68   inadequacy of the strategies often labeled as reflective practice in the sports coaching domain

69   (e.g., Cropley & Hanton, 2011). Although a number of authors offer structured guidance on

70   the actual mechanics of reflection (e.g., Gibbs, 1988; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001) and even on

71   how it may be taught (e.g., Gilbert & Trudel, 2006), it has been suggested that current

72   reflective practice approaches often portray confusing agendas, with insufficient instructional

73   guidance offered to coaches on "how" to engage in the process (Cropley, Miles, & Peel,

74   2012; Cushion et al., 2010) or indeed, on what aspects they should reflect (Abraham &

75   Collins, 2011). As a result, Cropley and Hanton (2011) question whether the domain of

76   sports coaching has simply "jumped on the bandwagon" of reflection, without properly

77   considering and understanding the concept, and how it might be best implemented.

78   Within the literature, reflection is frequently depicted in a hierarchical representation

79   of distinct levels or stages of reflection, ranging from shallow description at one end to

80   critical reflection at the other (e.g., Day, 1993; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Sen & Ford, 2009).

81   Crucially, it is the notion of critical reflection which is espoused as being the most

82   empowering and transformational in nature, allowing individuals to become more responsible

83   for their actions and providing a basis for practice that is ultimately emancipatory (Black &

84   Plowright, 2010; Saylor, 1990; Sen & Ford, 2009; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Critical

85   reflection involves "looking beneath the surface" of a situation in order to identify and

86   critique any assumptions that are being made, as well as challenge the values and beliefs that

87   are being drawn upon (Mezirow, 1990; Saylor, 1990). Indeed, Thompson and Thompson

88   (2008) highlight the importance of such critical "depth" in effectual reflective practice.

89   However, they also stress the need for critical "breadth"; that is, the adoption of a wider lens

90   in order to raise awareness of, and reduce susceptibility to, what Billet and Somerville (2004)

91   term the "social press." Explicitly, this includes the historical, social, cultural, and

92   institutional factors that influence and shape behavior (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2002). As

93   such, critically reflective coaches should be able to apply reflective processes that go beyond

94   the descriptive and harness the "why" and "what for" of coaching practice. For example, we

95   would expect them to (a) provide a critique of an incident or issue, not merely a description

96   of what happened (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998); (b) step back and adopt a questioning approach

97   when evaluating their experiences in order to understand "why" they coach the way they do

98   (Cushion et al., 2003); (c) clarify and understand personal coaching philosophies and

99   examine the underlying values and beliefs that shape their thinking and coaching practice

100   (Jones et al., 2002); and (d) maintain an open mind and critically examine the values

101   espoused by the social "milieu" and cultural context of their coaching practice (Stoszkowski

102   & Collins, 2012).

103   Nevertheless, in order to become critically reflective practitioners, coaches first need

104   to "learn" the complex skill of reflection, which Knowles et al. (2001) caution "is not a

105   simplistic process even with structured support" (p. 204). As such, there is a clear need for

106   practical tools and processes that might facilitate the development and measurement of

107   "appropriate" reflective skills. Accordingly, it is to one such potential tool that the focus of

108   this paper now turns.

109   Traditionally, the most consistently heralded technique for promoting reflective

110   practice in a variety of disciplines, including coaching, is structured written reflection, most

111   commonly in the form of a reflective journal (Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Anderson, 2007;

112   Knowles et al., 2001; Moon, 2006). More recently however, a new wave of Web 2.0

113   technologies have emerged which provide alternatives to reflective journals and are said to

114   have the potential to further strengthen and promote critical thinking and reflection in a range

115   of learning environments (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). Web logs (known as blogs), are a

116   social media platform that have been employed as a mechanism for increasing reflective

117   capacity and facilitating deeper learning across a range of educational settings, including

118   higher education (Churchill, 2009), teacher training (Stiler & Philleo, 2003), internships

119   (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012), and medical education (Whitcomb, 2003). In its simplest form,

120   a blog is an easily created website that resembles an online journal and allows an individual

121   to frequently record and publish their personal thoughts, viewpoints, and reflections on the

122   Internet (Downes, 2004; Sharma & Xie, 2008). Posts are made using a web browser and are

123   subsequently archived, organized, and displayed in reverse chronological order, allowing

124   users to refer back to earlier entries. In addition to straight text and hyperlinks, blogs can also

125   incorporate other forms of media, such as images, audio, and video (Duffy & Bruns, 2006).

126   As a result, a blog is said to be learner centered and full of authenticity, liveliness, and

127   accountability (Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011). It has also been reported that blogs require no

128   additional technical knowledge than that needed for basic word processing (Cold, 2006), that

129   they are motivating learning activities in themselves (Pinkman, 2005), and that they promote

130   greater ownership of content than paper-based journals (Downes, 2004; Godwin-Jones,

131   2003).

132   Furthermore, and perhaps more interestingly, one notable promise of "blogging" is

133   that it promotes multi-layered social interaction and interpersonal communication by

134   enabling readers to comment on blog entries. That is, readers can provide feedback on the

135   ideas presented, as well as "prompt" further reflection and thought regarding a stated

136   viewpoint or opinion (Duffy & Bruns, 2006; Top, Yukselturk, & Inan, 2010). Similarly, a

137   number of authors have suggested that blogs provide the perfect platform for collaborative

138   learning and reflective conversation (Freeman & Brett, 2012; Garrison & Akyol, 2009;

139   Godwin-Jones, 2003). That is, students build knowledge together as they are responsible for

140   one another's learning as well as their own (Dooly, 2008). Consequently, blogs are said to

141   have the capacity to develop into effective online or "virtual" communities of practice (Hall,

142   2008; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) defined

143   "communities of practice" as a group of people "who share a concern, a set of problems, or a

144   passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by

145   interacting on an ongoing basis" (p.4). In a CoP, each member is said to actively engage with

146   other members of the community (mutual engagement), actively share information and assist

147   each other to pursue the jointly agreed goal (joint enterprise), and share the routines, gestures,

148   words and actions that are common to the CoP (shared repertoire) (Galipeau & Trudel, 2006;

149   Wenger, 1988).

150   Moreover, shifting reflective journaling to an online medium such as a blog is said to

151   allow for "students" to have richer and more meaningful interaction with their tutors (Wolf,

152   2010). Tutors can observe and identify students' learning experiences, struggles, and

153   discomforts in order to make necessary accommodations during instructional activities

154   (Yang, 2009). Alongside this, they can assess the validity of the knowledge being generated

155   during the reflective process. Comments on blog posts can then be used to provide frequent

156   support in developing reflective skills as part of a formative process by accessing the blog

157   entries and sharing their expertise with the individual (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). Crucially,

158   blogs could therefore act as a platform to help coach educators direct and support experiential

159   learning (Culver & Trudel, 2006) and provide coaches with the structures, issues, knowledge,

160   and information they should reflect against, in order for their reflection to be sufficiently

161   critical. As such, the tutor's availability as an experienced dialogical other with which to

162   "do" reflection (Cushion, 2006) echoes Vygotsky's (1978) contention that an individual's

163   learning may be enhanced through engagement with a more capable other. Indeed, several

164   authors have concluded that the ongoing support and leadership of a dedicated facilitator (i.e.,

165   tutor) is crucial if communities of practice are to work in sports coaching (e.g., Culver &

166   Trudel, 2006; Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009).

167   Despite a variety of authors advocating the use of blogging to promote reflective

168   practice (e.g., Bruster & Petersen, 2013; Downes, 2004; Yang, 2009), the research available

169   on the use of blogs in different educational activities remains relatively limited (Sharma &

170   Xie, 2008). Furthermore, there remains a paucity of empirical research investigating their

171   application in the field of sports coaching. Indeed, at the time of writing, no published

172   studies have been undertaken which investigate the reflective affordances of blogs for coach

173   development. It must also be noted that results in other fields often remain informal,

174   unsystematic, and inconclusive (Kim, 2008; Sharma & Xie, 2008). In addition, the general

175   assumption that blogs can facilitate peer and group interaction, and, therefore, encourage the

176   social construction of knowledge, are yet to be supported by empirical findings (Halic, Lee,

177   Paulus, & Spence, 2010). Instead, it seems that the supposed technical advantages and

178   educational application of blogs have preceded evidence of their effectiveness (Halic et al.,

179   2010; Tan, 2006).

180   Therefore, the primary purpose of this preliminary investigation was to answer the

181   research question "Can blogs facilitate reflection and community of practice among a module

182   cohort of sports coaching students?" In order to determine if participants could critically

183   reflect on their coaching practice and participate in a community of practice (through the

184   auspices of online blogs created specifically for reflection), three specific research questions

185   served as guides in the data analysis:

186   1.   What types of reflection were involved in students' blog posts, that is, were they

187   descriptive or critical?

188   2.   To what extent did blogs facilitate social interaction and the development of a

189   community of practice?

190   3.   What was the module tutor's role in the process of blogging?

191   **Method**

192   **Participants**

193   The sample in the present study consisted of 26 full-time undergraduate students (6

194   females and 20 males), who made up a module cohort on a Sports Coaching degree program

195   during the 2012/13 academic cycle. The average age of the participants was 20.04 years (*SD*

196   = 1.34) and the median coaching experience was reported as 2 years, with experience ranging

197   from 1 to 5 years in a range of sports (See Table 1). All participants were concurrently

198   coaching in the community (i.e., over and above any practical coaching associated with their

199   course of study) for a minimum of two hours per week and had completed at least one

200   national governing body coaching award, with the highest awarded qualification translating

201   to level two of the UK coaching certificate endorsed framework (Sports Coach UK, 2012a).

202   Two participants had previous experiences with blogging.

203   **Procedure**

204   The module in question was titled "The Reflective Coach" and was a compulsory

205   component of the second academic year of the degree program. At the same time, students

206   were undertaking five other modules, two of which were compulsory and specifically related

207   to the pedagogy of coaching and professional practice. Their remaining three modules were

208   option choices selected from a suite including sports science and the "ologies" of coaching

209   (e.g., sport psychology etc.), and the development and sociology of sport (e.g., community

210   sport development, talent development pathways etc.). An introductory lecture highlighted

211   the module's aims, learning outcomes, and assessment procedures. Students were advised

212   that the upkeep of an ongoing reflective blog was a necessary element of assessment (worth

213   60% of final module grade) and were instructed to set up their own blog using the externally

214   hosted blog service of either https://wordpress.com or https://blogger.com. It was explained

215   that they could customize the web address of their blog, select a design template, and make

216   other layout customizations; as such, it was made clear that the ownership of the blogs lay

217   with the user (Tan, 2006). The second week's session was split into two. The first half

218   explored the conceptual and practical issues associated with reflective practice. Here, Gilbert

219   and Trudel's (2001) structured model of experiential learning, which has gained credence in

220   the extant literature (Cushion et al., 2010), was presented as an exemplar framework to guide

221   the reflective process. The second half then focused on reflective blogging; its purpose,

222   process, and pedagogical value. At the end of the session, students were given a reading list

223   of academic literature pertaining to reflective practice and instructed to make the first post on

224   their blog. The third week was then given over to the logistical procedures of the blogging

225   assessment. The module tutor explained that there was no length or subject requirement for

226   posts, but students were asked to reflect on personally significant events or "critical

227   incidents" (Cropley & Hanton, 2011; Holt & Strean, 2001) during their coaching/learning

228   (both inside and outside of university). It was explained that unlike most academic writing,

229   which is commonly in the third person, the use of first person was encouraged in order to

230   promote ownership and personalization of the entries (Moon, 2006). Based on the

231   assessment marking criteria, students were advised of the requirement to contribute to their

232   blogs regularly for the remainder of the academic year (26 weeks). This was stipulated as a

233   minimum of 15 separate posts made in different weeks. Other criteria included the quality of

234   written expression, level of reflection, analysis of material in relation to appropriate

235   theoretical concepts/models, and citations/links to additional relevant material (i.e.,

236   appropriate academic literature). Finally, in order to encourage the emergence of a

237   community of reflective practice, students were asked to read and provide constructive

238   feedback on their peers' blogs for the remainder of the module by clicking on the "reply" or

239   "comment" link on selected entries. As such, students were asked to maintain privacy

240   settings that would allow their blog to be openly viewed by their peers. In addition, it was

241   explained that the module tutor would monitor blog posts and provide regular feedback via

242   the same process.

243   Timetabled sessions for the remainder of the module (2 hours per week) primarily

244   involved student-led practical workshops designed to explore pedagogical theories and

245   concepts relating to coaching practice. Additional tutor support and feedback on blog entries

246   was also provided during one-to-one tutorials each semester, as well as during casual

247   discussions within timetabled sessions. The tutor recorded thoughts emerging from these

248   feedback processes and other observations of blogging activity in field notes for the full

249   duration of the module.

250   **Data Analysis**

251   A category analysis of all students' blog posts was conducted in order to identify the

252   focus of the entries they had made and determine the reflective quality of the writing

253   exhibited. First, each post was read multiple times and coded according to categories based

254   on Yang's (2009) framework for qualitative research on reflective blogs. As Yang's (2009)

255   framework focused on trainee teachers' reflections on the teaching process, it was modified

256   to fit the aims of the present study, which resulted in the following categories and

257   subcategories:

258   1. Theories of coaching. Postings by the students about the pedagogical theories relating

259   to coaching practice taught on the course.

260   2. Own coaching practice. Postings by the students referring to their own coaching

261   practice and the approaches and methods employed, as well as their expression of

262   beliefs and knowledge related to these practices.

263   3. Others' coaching practice. Postings relating to the coaching practice of others and the

264   approaches and methods utilised, as well as their expression of beliefs and knowledge

265   related to these practices.

266   4. Self-awareness. Postings based on self-consciousness and self-evaluation of own

267   skills and knowledge.

268   5. Blogging. Postings about; (a) the use of the blog, and (b) interacting with others

269   online.

270   During this analysis, a single blog post could fit into more than one category. On the two

271   occasions where the authors, both of whom were experienced researchers in qualitative

272   methods, disagreed about the categories in which a post was placed, negotiation was pursued

273 until a consensus of opinion was reached on their accuracy and clarity. Following the

274 recommendations of Krane, Andersen, and Strean (1997), a reliability check was also

275 conducted by asking an independent investigator, trained in qualitative methodology but

276 blind to the objectives of the study, to audit the assigned categories to ensure that they

277 accurately reflected blog entries. No errors were found.

278   Then, all entries were reread and coded in line with Hatton and Smith's (1995)

279 reflective writing framework, which has been used previously to identify levels of reflection

280 in student writing (Boud & Walker, 1998; Moon, 2006; Whipp, 2003). Hatton and Smith

281 (1995) based this framework on an extensive literature review and refined the categories and

282 definitions it employs over several trials (Rourke & Anderson, 2004). They identify four

283 types of writing: unreflective descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection,

284 and critical reflection. To support reliability when coding, Hatton and Smith (1995) provide

285 detailed guidance for using the framework, including specific examples for each of the four

286 categories (Poom-Valickis & Mathews, 2013). They also advise that within a single unit of

287 writing (i.e., a blog post) students may employ a lower level of reflection in order to then

288 progress to a higher level of reflective writing. As a result, each blog post was coded

289 according to the highest level of reflection reached within that entry (Freeman & Brett,

290 2012). Again, on the very few occasions (three) where minor coding discrepancies emerged

291 between the two authors, negotiation was pursued until a consensus of opinion was reached.

292   Finally, content analysis was used to examine each blog in terms of the number of

293 entries, the frequency of posts, the number of posts incorporating citations to other relevant

294 material, and the word count of each entry. Following the research methodology of Kol and

295 Schcolnik (2008), each blog was also examined using a web-based text analysis tool

296 (http://textalyser.net/) in order to identify possible differences in lexical density (i.e., the

297 complexity of posts) between semester one and two. This analysis was also applied in order

298   to identify changes in the range of vocabulary used in blogs (i.e., the number of different

299   words).

Results

301   A total of 448 blog entries were analysed (217 in semester one, 231 in semester two),

302   including 433 written posts and 15 containing speech based audio which were transcribed

303   verbatim and coded. The total number of blog entries made by each student ranged from 10

304   to 31 ($M = 17.23$, $SD = 4.51$), with written posts ranging from a minimum of 81 to a

305   maximum of 2481 words in length ($M = 518.35$, $Mdn = 428$, $SD = 323.65$), and audio posts

306   ranging from a minimum of 46 seconds to a maximum of 204 seconds ($M = 100.87$, $Mdn =$

307   76, $SD = 54.01$). The focus of students' blog posts varied. Table 2 shows that students' own

308   coaching practice was the most frequent topic, followed by self-awareness of their own skills

309   and knowledge, and posts relating to the theories of coaching taught on the course. The least

310   frequent topic was the process of blogging itself. The findings of the present study are now

311   arranged by the three research questions presented earlier in this paper.

What types of reflection were involved in students' blog posts?

313   As Table 3 shows, 11.16% of blog posts were coded as unreflective descriptive

314   writing according to Hatton and Smith's (1995) criteria. In these cases, the students simply

315   described what had happened and how they had responded to an incident or situation.

316   Beyond this, there was no discussion or analysis of the issue. For example, "The majority of

317   the children engaged very well…However, there were one or two children in my group who

318   just weren't interested in taking part and despite my best efforts, I couldn't get one of the

319   children to take part." With regard to more "productive" posts, the largest proportion of

320   coded units (56.47%) constituted descriptive reflection. These posts also involved students

321   providing an outline of what had happened and how they had responded to a situation or

322   incident from their own perspective. Notably however, they also evidenced attempts to give

323   reasons or provide justifications for events or actions. Nevertheless, this was again reported

324   or described in an uncritical way, as stated in Hatton and Smith's (1995) criteria. For

325   example, "The tone of my voice at times can be too low and I can at times speak too quickly

326   when nervous. This is most common when I work alone as I can become nervous if I feel

327   pressured."

328   The second largest proportion of students' blog posts (29.91%) were coded as

329   dialogic reflection. As defined, this type of reflection is more analytical, and involves

330   stepping back from, mulling over, or tentatively exploring reasons for events, for example:

331   It's really weird how much more confident I feel around this group than the coaching

332   group at Uni. I think it could be because I'm not afraid to do something wrong

333   whereas in class I'm afraid of doing something wrong and looking stupid.

334   In addition to description and analysis of the problem, the blog posts classified as dialogic

335   reflection also evidenced attempts to report an understanding of the wider context and see

336   things from alternative points of view, for example:

337   Why doesn't this type of session happen more often in schools? They learn

338   transferable skills, which you can see improving in front of you as they get more tries

339   at their game…I taught football in their school last year and I never saw the kids be as

340   involved, keen or inventive as I saw them today.

341   Crucially, only 2.45% of blog posts corresponded to Hatton and Smith's (1995) criteria for

342   critical reflection. As defined, this type of reflection demonstrates an awareness that actions

343   and events are not only explicable by multiple perspectives, but are also located in and

344   influenced by multiple historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts. For example, "As a

345   developing coach, and having had experience of teaching within a secondary school,

346   inclusion is a major aspect of the delivery process that is being pressed." Or, for example,

347   "Sometimes I think that coaches can become entangled in the success and publicity side of

348   competition. We rarely challenge the purpose of the competition or the impact it has on

349   children's development…"

350   Table 1 shows that 12 students posted on their blog 15 times (or less) during the year,

351   the basic requirement for the module, suggesting minimal engagements in the process. Of

352   those 12 participants, only six increased their number of posts between semester one and

353   semester two, and 10 increased the quality of their reflection (see Table 1). Of the 14 other

354   participants, six increased their number of posts and 13 increased the quality of their

355   reflection. In sum, only twelve of the 26 participants increased their number of posts, but 23

356   demonstrated evidence of the development of a more reflective style and a clear difference in

357   the reflective quality of their entries between the two semesters. Indeed, Table 3 shows that

358   the number of posts coded as dialogic and critical reflection rose in semester two when

359   compared to semester one. At the same time, the number of posts coded as descriptive

360   writing and descriptive reflection fell during the same period. Similarly, during semester

361   two, only one participant did not have dialogic or critical reflections, compared to 11

362   participants in semester one (see Table 1). Nevertheless, it seems that reaching the dialogic

363   and critical reflection levels was difficult for many of the participants since half of them had,

364   after two semesters, three or less of their posts at the level of dialogical or critical reflection.

365   Interestingly, of the very few posts that were made using uploaded audio, 12 of the 15 were

366   coded as dialogic reflection and the remaining three as descriptive reflection.

367   Positively, the number of blog posts that integrated citations to appropriate theoretical

368   concepts and academic literature within the discussion rose from an average of 3.88 per

369   student blog in semester one to 5.08 per blog in semester two. Similarly, Table 2 shows that

370   the number of blog posts that focused (at least partly) on the theories of coaching covered in

371   class increased between the two semesters. This suggests that some students began to make

372   more consistent links between theory and coaching practice, which would be expected with

373 the development of less descriptive reflection. This was coupled with a rise in the average

374 length of posts from 498 words in semester one, to 536 words in semester two, and a rise in

375 the average number of different words used in student blogs from an average of 891 different

376 words used in semester one to 1022 different words used in semester two. This is considered

377 an indication of development in the expression and elaboration of thoughts between the two

378 semesters. In addition, 19 out of the 26 students showed a reduction in the lexical density of

379 posts made in semester two when compared to semester one. This suggests that blog entries

380 became less complex and more easily understood as students used terminology surrounding

381 core concepts more consistently.

382 To what extent did blogs facilitate social interaction and the development of a

383 community of practice?

384   At the start of the module, three students stated their reluctance to make their blog

385 posts accessible for peer viewing and did not configure their privacy settings to permit this

386 until half way through semester one. Of the 26 students that maintained blogs during the

387 module, none provided direct feedback by leaving comments on the blog posts of their peers.

388 Similarly, none of the 448 entries made were aimed directly at the blogging environment and

389 creating a sense of community. Despite this, it was clear when surveying the students' blogs

390 that they were making a conscious effort to read their peer's blogs. For example, this was

391 evidenced in comments such as "One blog I looked at showed particular success from the

392 blog style of reflection, this blog talks about their resistance to begin blogging but once the

393 routine of posting was established they found it a useful tool for reflection." And, for

394 example, "Reading through peoples' blogs; it's clear that confidence, or lack of, is one of the

395 key concerns that a lot of people are focusing on improving throughout the year."

396   Similarly, several students made regular reference to their peer's blogs within their

397 own blog posts, indeed, often including direct links and "reflecting" on what they had read.

398   For example, one student remarked "…after reading X's thoughts on this session

399   (click here to view his post) it's interesting to see that he noticed our position when giving

400   instructions to the kids, this is something I was not aware of…" Whilst another commented:

401   I don't agree with X's further comments about me being the favored coach…He says

402   it's because I get across information in a sneaky way. By this I think he means that I

403   probe and probe until they really show an understanding.

404   What was the module tutor's role in the process of blogging?

405   Getting five students "signed up" with their personal blog account took more time

406   than anticipated and the module tutor spent several weeks prompting these students to do this

407   through direct emails. The tutor read all student blogs and provided feedback,

408   encouragement, and questioning to students via the "comment" function on each entry. For

409   example, "Well done, X. There is more depth coming through in this post…you are starting

410   to get down into the 'why' and 'how' which is good." And, for example, "Very insightful

411   post, Y. It would have been good to see a little more literature on reflective practice to help

412   back up these points but you make links with your own practice well." In many cases, the

413   tutor's feedback stimulated additional reflection, evidenced in subsequent "reply" comments

414   by the student, for example:

415   Thanks for the comment! I do have a tendency of being too descriptive…I have been

416   trying to add more analytical thinking. I really appreciate your help as this is

417   something I struggle with, is there anywhere you would suggest I could go to develop

418   this?

419   In addition, the feedback left by the module tutor would often prompt informal discussion

420   with the student during timetabled sessions and tutorials. On these occasions, students would

421   often ask for clarification on the comments made, or reaction to the subsequent posts made

422   after tutor feedback. In addition, the tutor would, at times, attempt to encourage students to

423   read the posts of others in order to stimulate further reflection. For example, "…this post

424   (hyperlink inserted) on a similar theme might stimulate some thought, do you agree with the

425   author?"

426   On each blog, the posts were dated and timed for the entry or upload of material. If a

427   student had not posted to their blog for more than three weeks (13 instances), the module

428   tutor would highlight this via comments on the blog, prompts "in person" and direct email.

429   As a result, some students would "bulk" upload the equivalent of several weeks of entries at

430   one time. When enquiring as to the reason for this, the tutor was often told that students

431   preferred to construct posts in a word processed document in order to later "cut and paste"

432   onto their blog, as opposed to composing posts directly on the blog itself.

Discussion

434   The findings of the present study are now discussed in line with the three research

435   questions presented earlier in this paper.

436   **What types of reflection were involved in students' blog posts?**

437   Consistent with the findings of other studies on the use of blogs for reflection (e.g.,

438   Lucas & Fleming, 2012; Parkes & Kajder, 2010; Yang, 2009), results highlighted that both

439   descriptive and critical reflection was evidenced in students' blogs, with the number of

440   descriptive reflections far exceeding those of a critical nature. Encouragingly, the majority of

441   students exhibited a positive trajectory toward higher order thinking, giving weight to the

442   suggestion that blogs might be a useful tool to foster the development of reflection in sports

443   coaching. However, in line with other attempts to formally integrate coach reflection into

444   university based coach education courses (e.g., Jones & Turner, 2006; Knowles, Tyler,

445   Gilbourne, & Eubank, 2006), some students struggled to adopt a reflective practice

446   orientation. That is, they did not move beyond sporadic use of their blog and reach the

447   dialogic and critical reflection levels on a regular basis (see Table 1). As such, it is clear that

448   the mere provision of a reflective tool is no guarantee that those using it will automatically

449   reflect at higher levels (Hatton & Smith, 1995). The results also lend weight to earlier

450   contentions that critical reflection is a skill that should be taught rather than assumed (Gilbert

451   & Trudel, 2006).

452   It has been suggested that coaches find it difficult to engage in effective reflection

453   unless they have the underpinning theoretical knowledge the reflective process requires (Peel,

454   Cropley, Hanton, & Fleming, 2013). As such, we recognize that whilst the participants in the

455   present study were given instructional guidance on how to reflect on their coaching practice

456   using blogs, with Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) structured model of experiential learning

457   presented as a potential framework to guide the reflective process, this could have been

458   insufficient to allow them to develop their understanding of the purposes and process of

459   reflective practice. That is, although the introductory lectures in the present study provided

460   participants with a structure to guide the mechanics of reflection, the actual reflective process

461   of issue setting, unpacking, and solving was not operationalized fully (Abraham & Collins,

462   2011). For example, participants were not encouraged to critically examine and analyze their

463   role frames in order to identify and/or reduce potential biases that might otherwise have

464   guided or influenced their behavior (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Equally, whilst having sports

465   coaches reflect on their day-today learning experiences in their own coaching context is

466   important (Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009), we recognize that by specifically asking

467   participants in the present study to focus on "critical incidents" during their experiential

468   learning, they may have been overly concerned with identifying or focusing on negative

469   aspects, or perceived "problems" within their coaching practice (Dixon, Lee, & Ghaye,

470   2013). In this regard, Smith and Jack (2005) suggest that individuals may "search" for

471   problems on uneventful days in order to tick the assessment box, whilst Dixon et al. (2013)

472   propose that coaches might neglect to focus on their strengths and "how" they do what they

473   already do well.

474   Clearly then, if we are to utilize blogs to facilitate reflection in coach education, we

475   may first need to put more explicit processes and strategies in place to both encourage

476   participation and guide coaches toward higher levels of reflection (Peel et al., 2013). Indeed,

477   the absence of sufficient structures to support reflective practice has been cited as an inhibitor

478   of enhanced reflection in previous research (Larrivee, 2008; Otienoh, 2009), with Knowles,

479   Borrie, and Telfer (2005) finding that none of the coach education programmes they

480   examined contained processes to overtly nurture reflective skills. Accordingly, Gilbert and

481   Trudel (2013) suggest that support devices such as reflection cards and critical reflection

482   exercises might help coaches to reflect more critically on their learning. Similarly, it has

483   been suggested that detailed rubrics or matrixes of descriptors characterizing reflections

484   might promote the development of critical reflection (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005; Larrivee,

485   2008), whilst structured blogging "tasks" (e.g., instructor prescribed topics), have been said

486   to lead to more focused and specific blogging without detracting from the personalized nature

487   of content (Robertson, 2011). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the development

488   of reflective capacity is a complex process requiring time, effort and practice in order for it to

489   be "learned" (Gelter, 2003; Knowles et al., 2001). Consequently, it must be noted that

490   although the present study required participants to reflect using their blog for a period of 26

491   weeks, this timeframe might still be insufficient to engender familiarity with, and

492   commitment to, the medium of blogging and the development of critically reflective skills

493   (Cropley et al., 2012).

494   **To what extent did blogs facilitate social interaction and the development of a**

495   **community of practice?**

496   The "social" influence of the blogging process was another factor which may require

497   explicit development. Despite several researchers (e.g., Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Hall,

498   2008; Hara & Hew, 2007; Yang, 2009) reporting that blogs have the capacity to promote

499   social interaction and the development of virtual learning communities, and a significant

500   body of research suggesting that coaches learn through their social interactions with others

501   (e.g., Culver & Trudel, 2006; Erickson, Bruner, Macdonald, & Côté, 2008), the present study

502   found that participants did not take advantage of the collaborative and peer discourse features

503   of blogs. Although students had direct access to peers' blogs (Wenger, 1998), and it was

504   apparent that many of them made the effort to regularly read their peers' blog posts, overt

505   dialogue and "reflective conversation" (Cropley et al., 2012) in the form of comments was

506   conspicuous in its absence. As such, it is clear that a community of practice was not an

507   automatic consequence of the availability of a collaborative tool in the present study (Chan &

508   Ridgway, 2006). This finding echoes the assertions of other researchers who have reported

509   that participants can often find it difficult to "make the step" toward a stronger sense of

510   community in an online environment (e.g., Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Similarly, more

511   dedicated "offline" studies have struggled to get coaches to interact with their peers and

512   engage in the joint enterprise that characterizes a functioning CoP (Culver & Trudel, 2006,

513   Culver et al., 2009; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004). For example, Gilbert and Trudel (2005) suggest

514   that, whilst having access to peer sounding boards is vital, the mere availability of peers is

515   not enough. Furthermore, those peers must also be respected and trusted for their knowledge

516   of coaching before coaches will seek their counsel. Crucially however, Mallett, Rossi, and

517   Tinning (2007) propose that the mutual trust and respect required to encourage social

518   interaction between coaches can take many years to develop, something that the participants

519   in the present study had not had. In addition, Lemyre et al. (2007) propose that facilitative

520   peer interaction between coaches is never inevitable, as the "tradition" in coaching is not for

521   coaches to share knowledge, but to conceal ideas in order to gain a competitive advantage. In

522   short, both this literature and our findings question the view of communities of practice as a

523   panacea in the coach development process, as apparent in the relative uncritical initiation and

524   rapid promotion of such groups, without the clearly essential carefully staged evolution.

525   Importantly however, Romiszowski and Mason (2004) argue that a seldom-

526   challenged assumption exists in online learning research whereby a lack of overt dialogue is

527   perceived as learners being "passive recipients" as opposed to actively engaged in learning

528   with others. In fact, Wenger (1998) suggests that the social construction of meaning does not

529   always require others to be "present." It could be argued, therefore, that the participants in

530   the present study were still capable of learning more from "lurking" (cf. Wright et al., 2007)

531   and "just" reading the reflections posted by their peers than if they had simply recorded their

532   own personal reflections (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). This is perhaps similar to the

533   assertions of a range of authors, who suggest that apprentice coaches spend time simply

534   observing other coaches as they become socialized into a subculture and learn how things

535   should be done (Lemyre et al., 2007; Nash & Sproule, 2009; Stephenson & Jowett, 2009).

536   Crucially then, we must acknowledge that the extent of the social interaction between the

537   participants in the present study may have been assessed by potentially insufficient or overly

538   simplistic quantitative measures, that is, the number of comments students made on peers'

539   blogs (Hrastinski, 2009).

540   Nevertheless, to facilitate and encourage interaction between students and the

541   purposeful discourse characteristic of collaborative learning and the co-construction of

542   knowledge (Chan & Ridgeway, 2006; Garrison & Akyol, 2009), more specific guidance on

543   both the process and value of peer-to-peer learning may have been needed. For example,

544   Gilbert et al. (2009) suggest that a written protocol describing how coaches should operate in

545   peer learning settings would increase the accountability of coaches in such a learning

546   environment. Crucially, it must also be noted that previous studies that report significant

547   levels of peer interaction and discussion on blogs required learners to complete directed tasks

548   (e.g., Yang, 2009). Additionally, we recognize that the reflective affordances of the

549   individual blogs operationalized in the present study might be insufficient for promoting the

550   social discourse necessary for collaborative reflection. For example, group blogging,

551   whereby a single blog functions as a collective platform for a "small" group of people to

552   contribute and simultaneously share learning experiences, is said to support the emergence of

553   interactive online communities and collaborative reflection (e.g., Makri & Kynigos, 2007).

554   This communal deliberation is subsequently said to encourage each individual group member

555   to become more critically reflective (Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2005). Consequently, group

556   based blogging might align more closely with social constructivist perspectives on learning

557   (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998), which many authors draw upon to stress the

558   importance of dialogue with others in providing a "place" for the development of reflective

559   practice and learning (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Reingold, Rimor, & Kalay, 2008). As

560   such, the adoption of reflective group blogs as a more overt means of establishing online

561   communities of practice is an interesting area for further investigation within sports coaching.

562   **What was the module tutor's role in the process of blogging?**

563   Attempts to systematically integrate reflection into coach education programmes have

564   primarily focused on reflection that is socially supported and/or mediated (Gallimore, Gilbert,

565   & Nater, 2013), with a trained "facilitator" who leads and supports the process said to be key

566   (Cassidy, Potrac, & McKenzie, 2006; Lyle, 2002). Collectively, the results in the present

567   study indicate that blogs were an effective platform for the module tutor to instigate and

568   facilitate meaningful dialogue with students in order to support their experiential learning and

569   guide the reflective process where necessary (Culver & Trudel, 2006). Crucially however,

570   this was only the case with those students who fully engaged in and committed to the

571   blogging process; a factor which must be considered and catered for both in future studies

572   and practical applications.

573   Such issues notwithstanding, the tutor was able to offer guidance on what elements of

574   a coaching issue need to be attended to, suggest what additional knowledge might be

575   required, and propose strategies that the coach might use to address the issue (Abraham &

576   Collins, 2011). Significantly, existing research has emphasized the importance of this type of

577   intervention if reflection is to move beyond the basic level of description (Churchill, 2009).

578   For example, significant empirical support has emerged for the scaffolding of reflection

579   through appropriate questioning from a mentor or more capable other (e.g., Reingold et al.,

580   2008; Vygotsky, 1978; Whipp, 2003).

581   However, in retrospect, the tutor recognized that his questioning comments could

582   have been in and of themselves more critical in order to draw out and encourage higher levels

583   of reflective thinking in the students. For example, when commenting on blog posts, the

584   tutor tended to encourage students to become more aware of their behaviors and develop a

585   rationale for their behavior by utilizing "why?" and "what if?" questions (Cushion et al.,

586   2003; Lyle, 2002). Yet, he rarely prompted students to be more aware of their role frames

587   (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004) and the values and beliefs that might underpin their behavior in a

588   particular situation (Jones et al., 2002). Moreover, little reference was made to the social and

589   cultural context of students' practice, all factors inherent within critical reflection. This is

590   particularly important, if, for example, we consider the social environment in which a coach

591   works. This environment is extremely complex, and coaches are faced with a diverse range

592   of influences, which pressure them to behave in certain ways in order to conform and secure

593   approval (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Collins, Abraham, & Collins, 2012; Stoszkowski & Collins,

594   2012). Consequently, the subtleties of this environment can promote and perpetuate the

595   value and acceptance of certain types of knowledge and behaviour over others (Cushion et

596   al., 2003) and guide what coaches choose to pay attention to as well as what they choose to

597   learn (Werthner & Trudel, 2006). However, when considering the relative inexperience of

598   some participants, the module tutor felt this level of questioning was perhaps beyond their

599   current level of understanding. Indeed, several authors attribute the superficial nature of

600   novice practitioners' reflections to less developed schema and a lack of appropriate

601   theoretical knowledge due to insufficient experience (Moon, 2006; Tan, 2006). This raises

602   the question of when is the appropriate time for this to occur and whether the journey toward

603   critically reflective practice is a linear journey through the distinct and progressive stages of

604   reflection.

605   **Conclusion**

606   Generally, results indicate that blogs hold the potential to facilitate reflection in

607   coaches; however, in the present study they did not facilitate overt collaborative learning and

608   the emergence of a community of practice. Nevertheless, we believe enough promise exists

609   to warrant further investigation of their potential in coach education pedagogy (Morgan et al.,

610   2013), particularly in utilizing group blogs to provide coaches with the opportunity to

611   enhance critical thinking skills by engaging in peer dialogue and collaborative reflection

612   (Culver & Trudel, 2006; Dixon et al., 2013; Manouchehri, 2002). Promisingly, given that a

613   recent four-year coach tracking study found that the cost, timing, and travel involved in

614   accessing coach education are major barriers to uptake (Sports Coach UK, 2012b), it seems

615   Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs could allow coach educators to provide ongoing support to

616   those coaches undertaking certification courses at relatively little monetary and "time"

617   expense to both parties when compared to face-to-face solutions (Piggott, 2013).

618   As with prior research into the use of blogs in learning however, several

619   methodological issues remain and we recognize the limits of what can be accomplished by a

620   relatively small scale and short-term study of this nature. For example, as the current study

621   utilized a sample of undergraduate students in order to increase the level of "experimental

622   control" over the process, as well as the homogeneity of participants, some readers may be

623   concerned that participants lacked autonomy during the reflective process and that, as a

624   result, engagement in the blogging process was mixed. We suggest the engagement levels in

625   the present study were less a case of perceived student autonomy and more a case of some

626   being more committed to learning than others, however, the findings clearly need extension

627   and, if results so indicate, confirmation into "mainstream" coaching. Indeed, Gallimore et al.

628   (2013) make clear there is a need to determine whether guided reflection initiatives can

629   endure beyond concept studies into wide scale implementation in sports coaching. Similarly,

630   there is a need to test whether the reflective skills evidenced during the blogging process

631   endure outside the constrains of a structured and assessed module (Knowles et al., 2006).

632   Indeed, Hobbs (2007) even questions whether or not reflective practice can, in fact, be a

633   required component of a course and still retain validity as genuine reflection. Additionally,

634   there is also a need for better insight into coaches' perception and satisfaction relating to blog

635   use for reflection and social interaction (Kim, 2008). We intend to pursue these lines in both

636   educational and "normal" coach development environments.

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Table 1

Number and Quality of Blog Posts According to Hatton and Smith's (1995) Framework

Coach	Sport	Semester 1 DiaR + CriR / Total		Semester 2 DiaR + CriR / Total		Total (S1 + S2) DiaR + CriR / Total		Increase number of posts (Total S2 - S1)	Increase quality of reflection (% S2 - S1)
1	Soccer	6/13	46%	4/5	80%	10/18	56%	No	Yes
2	Soccer	1/7	14%	4/10	40%	5/17	29%	Yes	Yes
3	Soccer	0/6	0%	2/13	15%	2/19	11%	Yes	Yes
4	Cricket	1/17	6%	4/14	29%	5/31	16%	No	Yes
5	Multisport	0/6	0%	1/9	11%	1/15	7%	Yes	Yes
6	Multisport	4/9	44%	6/8	75%	10/17	59%	No	Yes
7	Multisport	2/7	29%	6/10	60%	8/17	47%	Yes	Yes
8	Multisport	0/9	0%	4/6	67%	4/15	27%	No	Yes
9	Tennis	3/6	50%	9/14	64%	12/20	60%	Yes	Yes
10	Soccer	0/7	0%	1/6	17%	1/13	8%	No	Yes
11	Gymnastics	0/9	0%	2/8	25%	2/17	12%	No	Yes
12	Cricket	1/7	14%	6/8	75%	7/15	47%	Yes	Yes
13	Tennis	4/10	40%	10/11	91%	14/21	67%	Yes	Yes
14	Soccer	3/8	38%	5/8	63%	8/16	50%	No	Yes

15	Cricket	2/8	25%	1/7	14%	3/15	20%	No	No
16	Soccer	5/10	50%	6/7	86%	11/17	65%	No	Yes
17	Soccer	0/5	0%	1/10	10%	1/15	7%	Yes	Yes
18	Soccer	1/7	14%	2/8	25%	3/15	20%	Yes	Yes
19	Soccer	0/7	0%	2/8	25%	2/15	13%	Yes	Yes
20	Soccer	0/6	0%	1/8	13%	1/14	7%	Yes	Yes
21	Soccer	1/7	14%	0/7	0%	1/14	7%	No	No
22	Soccer	1/7	14%	4/7	57%	5/14	36%	No	Yes
23	Basketball	15/16	94%	9/10	90%	24/26	92%	No	No
24	Soccer	0/6	0%	1/4	25%	1/10	10%	No	Yes
25	Field hockey	0/5	0%	2/11	18%	2/16	13%	Yes	Yes
26	Field hockey	0/13	0%	2/13	15%	2/26	8%	No	Yes
	TOTAL	**50/218**	**23%**	**95/230**	**41%**	**145/448**	**32%**	**No**	**Yes**

Note. DiaR = Dialogic reflection; CriR = Critical reflection; S1 = Semester 1; S2 = Semester 2

Table 2

Topic Categories and Number of Coaches' Blog Posts

Topic Category	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total Number
1. Theories of coaching	88 (40.55%)	119 (51.52%)	207 (46.21%)
2. Own coaching practice	143 (65.90%)	147 (63.64%)	290 (64.73%)
3. Others' coaching practice	28 (12.90%)	30 (12.99%)	58 (12.95%)
4. Self-awareness	96 (44.24%)	112 (48.48%)	208 (46.43%)
5. Blogging	19 (8.76%)	17 (7.35%)	36 (8.03%)
5a. The use of the blog	12 (5.53%)	12 (5.19%)	24 (5.35%)
5b. Interacting with others online	7 (3.23%)	5 (2.16%)	12 (2.68%)

Note. Total percentage exceeds 100% as a single blog post (n = 448) could fit into more than one category.

Table 3

Coaches' Blog Posts According to Hatton and Smith's (1995) Framework

Level of reflection	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total Number
Descriptive writing	35 (16.13%)	15 (6.49%)	50 (11.16%)
Descriptive reflection	133 (61.29%)	120 (51.95%)	253 (56.47%)
Dialogic reflection	48 (22.12%)	86 (37.23%)	134 (29.91%)
Critical reflection	2 (0.92%)	9 (3.90%)	11 (2.45%)