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Over egging the pudding? Comments on Ojala and Thorpe

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Abstract

In a recent paper in ISIJ, Ojala and Thorpe offered a culturally based observation that questions the role and application of coaching in action sports. Their critique is focused on the action sport of snowboarding which, despite its' comparatively recent inclusion in the Olympics, retains a different, almost collaborative rather than competitive culture more akin to other action sports such as skateboarding and surfing. Ojala and Thorpe then present Problem Based Learning (PBL) as the solution to many of these perceived ills, describing the positive characteristics of the approach and promoting its cultural fit with action sport environments and performers. In this paper we offer a different perspective, which questions the veracity of the data presented and the unquestioningly positive view of PBL as *the* answer. Our alternative, data-driven perspective suggests that action sport athletes are increasingly positive, or even desirous of good coaching, of which PBL is a possible approach; suitable for some athletes some of the time.

Keywords: Coaching, action sports, adventure sports, Problem based learning

1 As researchers and practitioners in the field of adventure (our term – Collins &
2 Collins, 2012) or action (their term, which we will use throughout this paper) sports, we were
3 interested to read the paper on the role of the coach and the use of problem based learning by
4 Ojala and Thorpe (2015). We concur with their statement on the “unique value systems”
5 which athletes may hold and also that “not all action sport athletes pursue careers via
6 competition” (op cit., p. 65). Indeed, this was a crucial part of our own argument in
7 examining the important influences of social milieu and culture in the support approaches
8 used with performers (Willmott & Collins, 2015). It is essential that the social and cultural
9 context of a sport is carefully considered when developing appropriate support structures.
10 Indeed, the structures and systems around coaching are themselves a social and cultural
11 setting; a consideration when deciding on the optimum pathway for coach development,
12 methodology and deployment (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014).

13 However, we do not agree and must take issue with the positions espoused in other
14 aspects of their paper. Specifically, we feel that the picture presented of performer
15 perceptions is limited and that the presentation of Problem Based Learning (hereafter PBL)
16 lacks balance or criticality and misses an essential point of good coaching. We contend that
17 good coaching is a decision making game (cf. Abraham & Collins, 1998, 2011; Collins &
18 Collins, 2014, in press), and is holistic and inclusive in its methodology; in short, a single
19 method of coaching is almost inevitably flawed *for some purposes* and the fundamental of
20 good practice is the ability to select the right tool, at the right place and the right time to
21 develop an individual performer. Accordingly, we present a short treatment of our counter
22 position, in an attempt to stimulate debate.

23 **Counterpoint 1: Role of Coaching and Coaches in Action Sports**

24 We would be very interested to know which athletes made up the sample that the paper refers
25 to as it sounds like it may be dominated by non-competitors. The position presented is

26 certainly at odds with our own experience of action sports participants and suggests that the
27 sample may be biased towards an older generation, or media-focussed (as opposed to
28 competitive-focussed) sample of performers. To our knowledge, *most* of the current top
29 Finnish competitive snowboarders passed through the Vuokatti-Ruka Sports Academy
30 coached by Pekka Koskela and Antti Koskinen including Olympic silver medallists Peetu
31 Piironen and Enni Rukajarvi...“ and have had plenty of coaching and structure present in
32 both their formative and elite years” (P. Koskela, personal communication, June 21, 2015).
33 Interestingly, Ojala and Thorpe (2015) cite Rukajärvi as stating that she “... might pass on
34 the next Olympics” because she prefers styles of snowboarding which have more “soul” (p.
35 65). This is clearly supportive of multiple cultures within the sport, which our own work
36 inherently acknowledges, but surely *not* indicative of an anti-coaching stance. This may
37 suggest a need for a skill akin to cultural intelligence on the part of the coach (Peterson &
38 Brooks, 2004).

39 Finally, Ojala and Thorpe state categorically that “many of the most internationally
40 recognized Finnish professional snowboarders have no affiliation with the FSA” (p. 66) the
41 national governing body which provides coaching, science and funding support for
42 performance. The absence of any data to support this contention, either qualitative or
43 quantitative, is a clear weakness and would seem at odds with both the facts and perceptions
44 we reported above.

45 Ojala and Thorpe also appear to present a rather narrow view of what coaching is. In
46 fact, directly developing high end technical skills by telling/showing an athlete how to do a
47 trick is one small facet of the work (cf. Willmott & Collins, 2015). We would argue that,
48 while definitions of coaching struggle with a lack of clarity (Collins & Collins, 2012), this
49 view is dated at best. Our studies highlight that shaping and driving the essential feedback-
50 rich training environment is by far the more impactful role for most coaches we observe and

51 work with in action sports. This is a long way from the “traditional, authoritarian” style
52 which Ojala and Thorpe mention (p. 66) but which we have yet to observe in a high
53 performance, action sports context. Based on our experience it simply wouldn’t be tolerated
54 and certainly would not be effective.

55 We were also interested to note that “if the coach is to be taken seriously with respect
56 to enhancing snowboarding skills, he or she must have personally experienced and
57 successfully performed the skills they are teaching” (p. 66). Our experiences of working with
58 Bud Keene (coach to Shaun White, double Olympic and multiple X-Games gold medallist)
59 and Hamish McKnight (coach to Billy Morgan, executor of the world’s first quad-cork)
60 would suggest otherwise. Indeed, any sport is going to be very limited in its progress if this
61 perception of only teach what you can do were in any way universal. Surely, the point of any
62 coach in any activity is to enable performers to exceed their own achievement. We would
63 balance this with our own research highlighting that, in some action sports being undertaken
64 for non-competitive participation, the coaches’ developmental role is underpinned by a
65 personal ability in the activity and environment for safety and contextual reasons. This
66 personal ability is driven by a safety imperative and contextual driver, however; namely, the
67 coach is traveling with the action sports participants into remote locations, providing a
68 practical safety provision and coaching in context, (this differs from a purely guiding role).
69 Our original point remains, however; any sport relies on coaches who can develop levels of
70 skill higher than their own.

71 **Counterpoint 2: The Uncritical and Sole Promotion of PBL**

72 An effective coach will make use of a wide variety of coaching styles, using
73 Professional Judgement and Decision Making skills (PJDM – Abraham & Collins, 2011;
74 Collins & Collins, 2014, in press) to select the optimum tools for each specific context. As
75 such, meaningful consideration of *any* potential coaching methodology (by implication from

76 any source) should reflect a balanced, pros *and* cons approach. Medicine and education have
77 a long engagement with PBL and provides an informed perspective on PBL's value. So
78 where are the pitfalls and potential weaknesses of PBL?

79 Tan (2004), Wood (2003) and Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne and Llewellyn (2013) all
80 highlight that inexperienced learners experience insecurities, stress and overload until they
81 are familiar with the PBL process. While stresses and pressures need not be avoided, and are
82 arguably an essential part of deep learning (cf. Bjork 1994) and the development of an expert
83 performance (cf. Collins & MacNamara, 2012), this does suggest three points: (a) that
84 students at different stages of learning may require different teaching approaches, (b) that
85 epistemological and ontological differences may present challenges, and (c) cultural
86 perceptions of effective coaching are an important factor. The provision of declarative
87 knowledge, at least in problem solving, will surely be required prior to its use (Tan 2004).
88 The 'take home' being that, in fact, PBL does not meet everyone's needs all of the time.

89 More importantly, the question of efficacy of PBL as a pedagogy also has to be
90 considered. PBL potentially falls into the trap of being a fashion despite its 50 year history.
91 We feel that this is an unwelcome tendency in coaching and education. Notably, Newman
92 (2003) reduces these criticisms to a lack of high quality evidence, doubtful experimental
93 design and the nuances of PBL in its application. The lack of empirical evidence necessitates
94 greater research rather than assumptions on its validity in regard to PBL and its relevance and
95 value in action sports coaching. The nuances associated in its application demonstrates a need
96 for judgement and decision and supports our contention earlier that action sport coaching, in
97 fact all coaching, is a PJDM based activity.

98 Interestingly, Butler, Inman and Lobb (2005) identify that PBL does not necessarily
99 develop understanding. This may be an experimental design or application issue, but does
100 raise the potential that PBL may not fit within the notions of constructivism despite its

101 alignment with those philosophies. This appears to be supported by research that identifies
102 that PBL does not foster application or integration of knowledge, build on existing learning,
103 develop forward reasoning or cognitive abilities (Morrison, 2004; Walsh, 2005). Admittedly,
104 these views are challenged (cf. Vernon & Blake, 1993; Albanese & Michell, 1993, Norman
105 & Schmidt, 2000) but the jury is definitely out in this respect. At best, Morrison, (2004),
106 Moust et al, (2005), Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne and Llewellyn (2013) and Newman, (2003)
107 highlight that more research is needed (echoing our position) that findings for the efficacy of
108 PBL are inconclusive.

109 Finally, both Norman and Schmidt, (2000) and Colliver (2000) comment that PBL has
110 been ‘over sold’ by its advocates and identify that “any study that treats PBL as a single
111 intervention and examines the usual cognitive and clinical outcomes will arrive at a
112 conclusion of minimal difference” (Norman & Schmidt, 2000, p. 727). Against such critique,
113 its’ use has to clearly be more carefully considered and investigated. Consequently, and in
114 the present context, we would question the positive picture of PBL which Ojala and Thorpe
115 (2015) provide and encourage two further considerations, (1) a more pragmatic approach to
116 its application based on evidence and further research and (2) consideration of PBL alongside
117 other pedagogies.

118 **Conclusion**

119 Action sports present the coach and research with a new array of challenges.
120 Developing a body of knowledge that relates to action sports is a common goal of both our
121 investigation and that of Ojala and Thorpe. Within this emerging culture a healthy academic
122 debate is essential. We contend that Ojala and Thorpe’s (2015, cf. p. 68), engagement with a
123 single group prevents understanding of broader trends, and different ways of knowing. We
124 observe that, based on the two issues we have raised, such limitations are apparent in the
125 perspectives provided. As an example of the limitations, they cite Hmelo-Silver and

126 Eberbach (2012) on the goals of PBL as being to develop (a) flexible knowledge, (b)
127 effective problem-solving skills, (c) effective self-directed learning skills, (d) effective
128 collaboration skills, and (e) intrinsic motivation. We would have to observe that, far from
129 being the sole preserve of PBL, this summarises all good coaching. So, in summary, and as a
130 means to stimulate debate, we suggest that:

- 131 • culture is an important factor in coaching *any* sport, not just the action ones.
- 132 • action sport athletes may be far more accepting, indeed desirous, of good coaching
133 than Ojala and Thorpe suggest;
- 134 • PBL is one technique of many that are appropriate to coaching any athlete, the
135 decision to use the right tool in the right place at the right time with the right person
136 being the pivotal factors in good coaching.

137 We look forward to further research and debate in this area.

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