

GUEST EDITORIAL

Learning cultures and cultural learning in high-performance sport: opportunities for sport pedagogues

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High-performance sports provide athletes with a variety of learning experiences. Because athletes invest significant time and energy in training and competition over relatively long periods of time and because sport assumes high levels of significance to athletes, learning can involve intense and long-lasting changes that have consequences within and beyond sport (Barker et al. 2014; Barker-Ruchti et al. 2012). Despite the centrality of learning in high-performance sport, scholars have given this topic little attention. While there are exceptions (e.g. Gearity 2012; Light 2010; McMahon and Penney 2013; Rynne, Mallett, and Tinning 2010), many aspects of learning in high-performance sport remain uncharted.

The limited body of literature on learning in high-performance sport may surprise since this topic has received considerable attention in physical education, in relation to both physical education pupils (e.g. Quennerstedt et al. 2014; Quennerstedt, Öhman, and Öhman, 2011) and physical education teachers (e.g. Armour, Makopoulou, and Chambers 2012; Keay 2005, 2006; Makopoulou and Armour 2011; Sirna, Tinning, and Rossi 2008). Using socio-cultural perspectives of learning, this literature demonstrates that learning occurs continuously and regardless of, for instance, teaching method and age/career stage, but is influenced by reflexive interactions between socio-cultural, structural and situational factors and individual agency. In so doing, this existing literature points to the complex and relational nature of learning.

Building on this literature, the broad aim of this special issue is to provide an entry point for investigations into learning in high-performance sport. We recognise that there are multiple potential ways to examine learning in high-performance sport; however, we are concerned with demonstrating the utility of using a cultural learning framework (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008). The value of this framework in our view lies in its capacity to capture different dimensions of learning in a holistic manner. In this introduction, we present the framework as two inter-related and complementary parts: Theory of Learning Cultures and Cultural Theory of Learning. This particular cultural perspective of learning has to date not been formally presented to the physical education and sport pedagogy community. As our experiences with this approach have been positive, we consider this an opportunity for further valuable scholarship.

The first part of this introduction focuses on the context of learning, including the practices and discourses in which learning takes place. The second part focuses more specifically on the process of learning. Following, we build on existing social learning in sport literature and outline what we see as the contemporary culture of high-performance sport. Our contention is that a dominant global culture shapes high-performance sport. As such, these universal issues shape the local sporting contexts described in each of the contributions of this issue. We conclude the guest editorial

with questions that are dealt with in the issue's articles and that we regard as being generative for the study of cultural learning in high-performance sport more generally.

Theory of learning cultures

In proposing how learning can be understood culturally, Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2007) draw on an anthropological definition. Such a view sees culture as constituted by human, often collective, activity, involving practices, interactions and communication. From this perspective, high-performance sporting cultures are not defined as particular locations, but as practices that are constituted by the 'actions, dispositions and interpretations of the participants' within (Hodkinson et al. 2008, 34). This view of learning resonates with Bourdieusian thinking, which has indeed influenced cultural theories of learning (e.g. Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2007; Hunter, Smith, and Emerald 2014; MacPhail, Kirk, and Griffin 2008). Cultural perspectives take context to be of paramount importance, and locate persons and culture in a reflexive relationship where individuals are involved in a process of shared cultural production and reproduction.

This reflexive aspect constitutes an important distinction from sociological explanations of socialisation or enculturation, which are relatively common in sports research (see, e.g. Barker-Ruchti 2010; Johns and Johns 2000). From a cultural learning perspective, individuals are seen as able to shape the cultural settings they occupy (Peim and Hodkinson, 2007). Thorpe's (2009, 2010) research on snowboarding culture, for instance, provides examples of boarders reconstituting gender practices. Pringle and Markula's (2005) work shows how some male rugby players challenge discourses of competing with injuries. Cultures, however, cannot be re-invented at will. Rather, in line with Bourdieu's work, cultures develop over time and histories have enduring effects. It is difficult to ignore, for example, that certain sports endorse particular kinds of practices and ways of being while discouraging others. Indeed, there are numerous sporting examples where durable values and norms, although dynamic, have been found to normalise practices, relationships and ethics (see, e.g. Barker-Ruchti et al. 2012; Pappa and Kennedy 2013; Schubring and Thiel 2011).

A cultural examination of people's conduct recognises that actions and interactions are relational, situational, dynamic and often unpredictable (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008). Such an examination invites questioning all that constitutes practice, including 'language, the distribution and deployment of spaces, the symbolic message systems of the built environment, hierarchies of knowledge, social hierarchies and the relations they give rise to' (Peim and Hodkinson 2007, 389). In sport, micro-level interactions between athletes and between athletes and coaches, meso-level policies (e.g. relating to funding and facilities) and macro-level discourses (e.g. ideologies based on gender, race, class) would be questioned.

To account for these features and their relations, Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2007) adopt Bourdieu's concept 'field'. Bourdieu (1996/1992, 72–73) describes field as a 'configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions'. It is a definition that opens boundaries of learning cultures to account for individual, local and institutional influence and interaction, and socio-cultural forces. To a certain degree, the notion of 'market', which draws attention to unequal power relations and distribution of resources, and 'the notion of game', which points to the struggles over these, are useful for understanding how a field operates (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004; Hodkinson, Biesta, and James, 2008). In high-performance sport, both notions apply, such as, for instance, in relation to the unequal symbolic status of sporting disciplines,

distribution of finances and sponsorship, and relationship between athletes and stakeholders. Certainly, the unequal distribution of and struggles over status and resources are important situational factors that help explain individual differences in learning (Quennerstedt et al. 2014).

The notion of overlap between socio-cultural, structural and situational forces, boundaries and individual subjectivities overcomes weaknesses of existing participatory approaches to learning (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008). Rather than considering how individuals participate in cultural contexts, the emphasis of Theory of Learning Cultures is on power in relation to social and contextual aspects, as well as on individuals' subjectivities. However, while individual subjectivity remains in focus, individual agency (in relation to the nature of knowledge, interpersonal relationships and local practices) is not accounted for. For this reason, Hodkinson et al. (2008) bring agency into the equation with the use of Cultural Theory of Learning.

Cultural theory of learning

In considering agency, Hodkinson et al. (2008) have extended the notion of learning with Bourdieu's concept 'habitus'. Habitus refers to a 'battery of durable, transposable but also mutable dispositions to all aspects of life' (Hodkinson et al. 2008, 38). It incorporates all that a person brings to a field (e.g. capitals, dispositions), and provides a way of thinking about the individual and social nature of a person's learning. Some of this learning will have occurred sub-consciously or tacitly, but some will also have occurred through purposeful or intelligible action (Hodkinson et al. 2008).

Through individuals' interaction with their environments and with others, habitus evolves. This creates 'horizons for action' (Bloomer, Hodkinson, and Billett 2004; Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996) and 'horizons of learning' (Hodkinson et al. 2008). A horizon connotes vision, meaning that what one can see is what one has available. It also alludes to the existence of prospective limits. A horizon for action refers to how individuals' positions within contexts along with their personal dispositions construct potential actions, such as those related to thinking and writing (Bloomer, Hodkinson, and Billett, 2004) and career choices (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). A horizon of learning, in contrast, refers to the learning that is possible in relation to individuals' dispositions and the learning cultures in which they participate (Hodkinson et al. 2008). For both metaphors, although the available visions bind possibilities for, and the nature and extent of, learning, they allow individuals to negotiate what can be done and known through intelligible actions, reflections and understanding. Horizons thus generate not only meaningful learning and practices, but also 'meaning-giving perceptions' (Bourdieu 1984, 170). That is, individuals come to perceive ways of thinking as meaningful, to some extent because the context conditions individuals to do so, but also because individuals are able to create knowledge.

The dynamic intersection between being conditioned and constructing meaning is the point where learning theorists have developed the notion of 'learning as becoming' (Hager and Hodkinson 2009; Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008). Hodkinson and colleagues suggest that since people learn through tacit and purposeful action and interaction, a person 'is constantly learning through becoming and becoming through learning' (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James 2008, 41). This process is complex, often gradual, and may also follow significant life-changing events (e.g. becoming a parent, becoming a victim of a crime). An athlete's learning because of her being in and interacting within a sporting club may differ significantly from the learning she might experience following a severe back injury. Learning may thus range between superficial and deep. Lastly,

becoming is likely to occur simultaneously in several fields and be of different effects depending on what is going on and who one is. For some, the conflict differing contextual expectations (and becoming) create may be tricky to handle (e.g. female athlete who is faced with and has to handle corporeal ideals outside and within sport).

'Culture' of contemporary high-performance sport

If culture is crucial to how and what athletes learn, then it is worthwhile conceptualising the culture of contemporary high-performance sport. We recognise that different sports and even different clubs have different local cultures. Nonetheless, we believe that there is evidence to suggest that (1) as a global phenomenon, high-performance sport is characterised by a dominant culture and (2) this culture is commodity-oriented. It is this orientation that we would now like to outline as a foundation for the articles included in this special issue.

A number of commentators have examined the commodification of sport in relation to socio-economic parameters (e.g. Moor 2007; Walsh and Giulianotti 2001). Building on this view and following Peters and Wals' (2013) work, we would like to propose that commodification involves a hegemonic trend based on an industrial society model (e.g. Barker-Ruchti, Barker, and Annerstedt 2014). Commodification is characterised by fragmentation, prescription, management, control and accountability. Epistemologically, the commodity orientation takes empirical rationalism as a starting point and privileges scientific and technical knowledge. In relation to high-performance sport, a commodity orientation is reflected in four areas: (a) the intended purpose of participation in high-performance sport; (b) how athletes are viewed; (c) coach – athlete relationships and (d) the intended purpose of training.

The purpose of sport

In high-performance sport, practices orientate towards a market of results, medals and records. This market influences how governing bodies steer sport (e.g. Houlihan and Zheng 2013; Sam 2012) and how athletes themselves perceive the purpose of sport participation (Kerr and Barker-Ruchti 2014). Actions are frequently investment driven, that is, stakeholders including national sporting organisations, sponsors, coaches and even athletes become 'investors' with expectations on returns for money, time and energy spent on expertise and equipment. While performance results can be easily measured and are valued as forms of symbolic capital (Sam 2012), particular appearances and/or conducts may also be marketable and equally attractive for sponsors (Schaaf 2012). The 'market' orientation thus has different distributive outcomes for sports within a broad high-performance sports culture. Less popular sports cannot achieve the same returns on investment as those historically and ideologically dominant. Synchronised swimming teams in today's market-driven culture, for instance, struggle to attract even a fraction of the sponsorship that successful elite football teams do. As a result, a commodity orientation effectively hierarchises sports.

A commodity orientation places relatively fixed demands on coaches and athletes in terms of participation in tournaments or placings in a competition. Athletes, however, bring to their sports varying bodies, abilities and dispositions, as well as move between phases of exceptional and poor performances. Their positioning within their contexts is thus unstable and can relatively easily cause a mismatch between calculated expectations and actual performance. The pressure to fulfil market exigencies has been linked, on the one hand, to an 'ethic of excess' (Johns 1998), where much is done to

secure performance and performance enhancement; and on the other, drop-out (e.g. Gustafsson et al. 2008). Neither outcome appears desirable, neither from an institutional nor from an individual perspective. As long as marketable outcomes are prioritised and competition formats remain the same, potentially harmful and/or illegal practices and exclusion will continue to be common place (Kvalnes and Hemmestad 2010).

View of athletes

The commodity logic of sport also shapes stakeholders' views of athletes. Within recent sport coaching literature, the outcome orientation has been linked to an objectification of athletes (Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac 2009). As athletes become commodities in the pursuit of measurable outcomes, they may be treated more like machines or resources than thinking and feeling individuals. Backed by scientific methods, sports administrators and coaches use individual characteristics and measurements (e.g. body weight, size) to calculate and predict performance, and thus athletes' worth (McMahon and Penney 2013). Depending on such predictions, athletes are included or excluded and training regimes and interventions planned. Athletic 'machines' are assumed to improve performance in a progressive and negative exponential fashion (Newell and Rosenbloom 1981). Tight timeframes and long-term training plans and competition schedules are organised around a combination of rational-scientific principles and empirical data that are collected increasingly early in athletic careers. A consequence of this thinking is that despite the centrality of the athletes' performances to the whole endeavour, power is shifted away from athletes towards coaches and a battery of scientists who claim to be able to make more valid predictions.

Coach-athlete relationships

A number of investigators suggest that contemporary coach-athlete relationships are characterised by rank and power (e.g. Jones 2009). Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac (2009) propose that an outcome orientation has led to technocratic, rationalistic and unproblematic approaches to coaching. Coaches are considered as experts and leaders, athletes as learners and followers. Certainly, much research has shown that coaching pedagogies are predominantly authoritarian and instrumental in nature (e.g. McMahon 2011), with a primary goal being to eliminate distractions, conflict and forms of indeterminacy (e.g. Denison et al.

2015). However, as Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2007) acknowledge in other fields, such synergising between commodity orientation and practices comes at a cost. In high-performance sport, these costs are related to the disempowerment of athletes and the dismissal of creative and potentially fruitful ways of approaching high-performance sport (Barker- Ruchti et al. 2014; Jones 2009). As mentioned earlier, disadvantages also relate to performance enhancement, injuries and drop-out.

Purpose of training

Following the above arguments, the purpose of training from a commodity perspective is to stimulate performance results that fit the market. Training is focused on continuous athletic progress, usually measured with normative targets. Coaches plan and coach accordingly, setting up training sessions that train particular aspects depending on competitive season or athlete performance. In many sports, performance targets create competitive structures and are sometimes bound by age

(e.g. women's artistic gymnastics). Such instructions are exclusive and force athletes who do not develop performance according to pre-set levels out of (high-performance) sport. Lower or late learning is not accounted for.

Of course, not all high-performance sporting contexts fit the 'commodity' orientation. Many will be less focused on outcomes, will not treat athletes as machines and will also draw on other forms of knowledge (e.g. intuition) to guide practice (e.g. Annerstedt and Lindgren 2014; Barker-Ruchti et al. 2014; Grahn 2014). Jones' (2009) work, in particular, recommends a pedagogical turn to coaching, one that involves coaches caring for their athletes beyond the teaching of sport-specific skills. Indeed, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation and appropriate role modelling have been found to stimulate positive youth development (Vella, Oades, and Crowe 2012). However, we contend that a commodity-driven orientation is a significant part of contemporary high-performance sport and that it must be acknowledged if one is to look at learning cultures and learning in high-performance sport.

Studying learning in high-performance sport

We would like to conclude with questions we consider expedient for the study of learning cultures and learning in high-performance sport. Given the global culture outlined above, we regard the questions generative for the development and enhancement of contemporary high-performance sporting cultures. Like others (e.g. Colley et al. 2003), we believe that research along these lines will provide insight into how learning cultures can be transformed to improve coaching and learning and constitutes an area where sports pedagogues can make an important contribution to high-performance sport practice.

Working with Hodkinson, Biesta, and James' (2008) conceptualisation of cultural learning, we propose two key foci for a more holistic study of learning in high-performance sport:

- (1) How do individuals become high-performance coaches and athletes (recognising that there are different ways to be a high-performance coach/athlete)?
- (2) How does cultural context influence learning, and how can coaches and athletes exert influence on their contexts to increase intentional learning?

For us, these questions and the theoretical framework from which they emerge shift the focus of much contemporary research from coaching effectiveness and performance enhancement to a focus on learning in a multidimensional sense. This is indeed the purpose of this special issue. Rather than asking normative questions, the following contributions consider learning contexts in terms of broad socio-cultural discourses, sport-specific communities, interpersonal relationships and individual dispositions, histories and agency.

In particular, the first article – The Australian Institute of Sport as a learning culture, authored by Lee and Price (2015) – considers an institutional context that is described to be shaped by political and economic strategies in relation to the learning of those athletes residing within this organisation. Following this, the second article – In pursuit of becoming a senior coach: The learning culture for Australian Football League (AFL) coaches, written by Mallett et al. (2015) – focuses on the turbulence and contestation of one sport, (AFL) and considers how these characteristics influence the relationships between senior and assistant coaches and specifically the development of future top-level AFL coaches. The third article – Media, digital technology and

learning in sport: A critical response to Hodkinson, Biesta and James, composed by Enright and Gard (2015) – pays attention to how media and digital technologies within two sporting examples, English professional football during the 1950s and 1960s and contemporary downhill longboard skateboarding, relate(d) to the learning of these sports’ participants. In the fourth article – Moving forwards with the aim of going backwards fast: High performance rowing as a learning environment, authored by Rossi, Rynne, and Rabjohns (2015) – the focus is placed on the different roles individuals within high-performance sports may adopt, particularly how the athletic, coaching and administrative roles one coach occupied affected his learning. The fifth article – Moving into and out of high-performance sport: The cultural learning of an artistic gymnast, written by Barker-Ruchti and Schubring (2015) – demonstrates how one gymnast’s career transitions to a national training and out of this sport shaped this athlete’s learning. Finally, the commentary – High performance sport, learning and culture: New horizons for sport pedagogues? written by Penney and McMahon (2015) – concludes the volume by pointing to how sport pedagogues can and should pursue research on learning in high-performance sport, especially also with regard to how contemporary horizons within this field can be employed to generate useful insight.

While they are admittedly not exhaustive of topics within the scope of learning in high-performance sport, it is our hope that the contents of this issue are able to create an entry point into the topic of learning in high-performance sport. Moreover, we trust that the contributions provide food for thought as well as inspiration to investigate high-performance sport from pedagogical perspectives.

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