Clarifying the Concept of Communities of Practice in Sport: A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

Sport is a unique social setting in which to examine the learning of various actors. The diversity of sports, sporting levels, as well as the dominant sporting cultures and traditions, means that there is an undeniable need to explain and clarify the place and the potential of any concept of learning. This is particularly so for a widely used (and often misused) concept like Communities of Practice (CoPs).

The underlying reason that theories of situated learning have the potential to be so powerful is because they foreground an aspect of learning – the social - that had previously been uncritically omitted in many discussions of learning. This is particularly relevant to coach development where learning from others, whether as athletes or developing coaches, has been repeatedly shown to be critical [1-5]. Indeed, as noted by Culver and Trudel, CoPs offer a way in which we can describe and understand certain out-of-the-classroom learning opportunities.

JOINT ENTERPRISE AND MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT

Culver and Trudel remind us that CoPs are not simply “groups of people who are gathered with the clear objective of learning” (p. 3). Other conditions must be satisfied for any collectivity to be considered a CoP. In particular, the aspects of joint enterprise and mutual engagement are of great significance to the sporting domain. Indeed, previous research [6, 7] has been able to identify examples of joint enterprise. A major difficulty, however, is achieving a quorum of coaches over an extended period to negotiate a shared joint enterprise. Without a sufficiently captivating joint enterprise, the relations may more closely resemble an informal knowledge network [8].

Regarding mutual engagement, it is the development of sufficiently engaging and binding relations that are difficult to achieve in coaching settings where the barriers to meaningful interactions are many and varied. This may be reduced in settings where competition is decreased (e.g., coaches within the same club, coaches across leagues, coaches across different sports), but these interactions are not without problems either [9]. Geographical considerations are also of significance in Australia where the numbers of coaches available for involvement in particular communities (i.e., of similar standing who have a better chance of establishing mutual engagement around a joint enterprise) are reduced. Perhaps a future aspect that might be emphasised and investigated is the role of technology in forming distributed CoPs. This may also aid interaction between coaches in different leagues, countries or even sports.
AGENCY AND INTENTIONALITY
A major point that Culver and Trudel make is that CoPs do not just appear. An integral component of this is the acknowledgement that the role of the individual is paramount to the establishment and maintenance of a CoP. Commendably, Culver and Trudel acknowledge the role of the individual on a number of occasions. In somewhat of a contrast, a criticism of the CoP framework has been that the individual does not receive particular attention as separate from the community [10, 11]. In other words, the ‘how’ of learning seems to disappear in the broader concept of learning as participation. It is argued that the relation of individual learning processes to collective processes is rarely actually theorized, so individual differences in perspective, disposition, position, social/cultural capital, and forms of participation remain largely unaccounted for [11, 12]. For this reason, it would be very difficult (if not impossible) to make specific claims about the role of agency and intentionality when employing a CoP framework in the examination of coach learning. It is clear that Culver and Trudel are not attempting to do this, but for those who are seeking to examine these aspects, other frameworks may need to be employed [13].

SKILLED FACILITATION
An important point to keep in mind is that, as with legitimate peripheral participation (the other key element in Lave and Wenger’s [14] discussion of situated learning), the CoP component is not proposed as a pedagogical technique, but rather is a tool for theorising or thinking about learning [15]. This being the case, it is encouraging to see the emphasis that Culver and Trudel place on what can be done to support, foster and develop the conditions necessary for them to flourish. From Culver and Trudel’s article and some of their previous work [6], it is clear that the continued involvement of a skilled facilitator is critical to the successful functioning of the community. This is exemplified by the fact that the coaches of the alpine (downhill) ski club all recognised the benefits of participation in the community but were not involved in the subsequent season. Given the seemingly essential involvement of a skilled facilitator, the obvious questions are where will these individuals come from and how will they develop the required skills? It should also be considered that in each of the examples of facilitation, the facilitator is recognisably rewarded (e.g., through the achievement of research outcomes, securing future research funding, etc).

THE COMPETITIVE NATURE OF COACHING
Another concern raised in previous critiques of CoPs relates to the term ‘community’ and the associated feelings of comfort and close relationships, where individuals feel at ease and willing to contribute to the proceedings without fear or threat [10, 16]. Within the CoP framework, communities are often seen as benign whereas the reality in coaching is often quite different [2, 17, 18]. As noted in the quote by Anklam [19] included in the paper by Culver and Trudel, trust is exceedingly important to learning in sporting contexts. This was a point that was made patently obvious when Culver and Trudel stated that coaches regularly view other coaches “more as opponents than collaborators” (p. 5). It is significant that in the development of the notion of situated learning and CoPs, the contexts were relatively non-competitive and collegial in nature (i.e., Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, US Navy quartermasters, meat-cutters, and non-drinking alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous). Even the mildest of coaching contexts are fundamentally based on competition with explicitly designated winners and losers.
CONSTELLATIONS OF CoPs

Despite this potential limitation, a critical point made by Culver and Trudel was the need for coach educators to “see how different combinations of formal, nonformal, and informal learning opportunities can best be combined” (p. 8). It is clear that there is no single means by which coaches learn. Even CoPs are only capable of achieving some of the outcomes surrounding coach learning. However, when operating in their fullest sense, constellations of CoPs have the opportunity to achieve outcomes not possible by other means. For example, the concept of CoPs as an agent for transforming sport culture is a feature that is especially attractive given the strong historical association of sport with racist, sexist and violent behaviours [20].

CONCLUSION

Overall, the potential of this model of learning for coaches should be tempered by the knowledge that there can be extreme difficulties in establishing and maintaining fully-functioning communities that fulfil the conditions of being a CoP. Similarly, along with the positive aspects, there have been a range of critiques levelled at CoPs [10, 12, 16, 21]. The identified weaknesses associated with CoPs tend to appear only when researchers (or those interpreting the research of others) attempt to account for components of learning that are simply not foregrounded in the concept. That is not to say that the CoP framework denies the existence of some of these components, it simply does not emphasise or deal with them. There is a need to promote a balanced view of the contribution that CoPs can make to coach learning, one that acknowledges and accepts the critiques as well as promotes and capitalises on the potential strengths.

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Clarifying the Concept of Communities of Practice in Sport: A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION
Coaching knowledge and practice is largely based on experiences and the personal interpretation of those experiences [1, 2]. Formal coach education, however structured, remains a relatively low-impact endeavour when compared to the amount of hours receiving, observing, assisting and leading coaching practice [1, 3]. In addition, the coaching environment is increasingly being recognised as a social space where both athlete and coach learning and development take place. Therefore, by definition informal or experiential learning plays the dominant role in producing and reproducing coaching. Because this learning is situated within social and cultural contexts, the individual is less involved in de-contextualised knowledge acquisition but is constructing knowledge through direct experience of social practice [4, 5]. Against this backdrop, it is vital that coaching scholars are able to provide potential for both a theoretical understanding of coach learning and for guiding practitioners.

COMPLEXITY AND POWER RELATIONS
In responding to this need, Diane Culver and Pierre Trudel in this article and elsewhere [6] provide an excellent discussion about the work of Lave & Wenger’s and latterly Wenger’s community of practice (CoP) framework as a way to consider methods of knowledge production and dissemination in social practice. These concepts remain an important source of theoretical insight for research into coach learning. Importantly, as Culver and Trudel suggest, work such as this also adds to the discussion and debate necessary to further intellectualise coaching and define its identity as a profession [7, 8]. The debate in this case centres around the nature of CoPs and by definition the very nature of practice itself.

Coaching practice is extremely complex [8] and it is this complexity that plays a crucial role in the configuration of opportunities and barriers to learning that coaches encounter. Consequently, CoPs in coaching and subsequent learning may not be as neat and tidy or indeed as easy to decipher as we would like. Further muddying the waters, complex coaching practice and therefore CoPs importantly, are not benign social structures, and in fact may not be at all stable, cohesive or even welcoming [9, 10]. Therefore, the working of power relations is central in determining the existence of CoPs, their nature and boundaries and inevitably the learning that takes place.

As a result of this, it is important when attempting to understand CoPs, and indeed facilitate their working, to acknowledge the inherent power relationships and complexity of
practice. Importantly, within CoPs the power that sets and relocates boundaries which extend or deny opportunities for learning is unevenly distributed. In coaching, power is stratified through complex social divisions, and these divisions are along both social and cultural lines [11, 12], and are not perhaps just a matter of ‘league position’ or ‘local rivalry’. These complex relational factors mean that delineating the boundaries of CoPs and identifying learning therein is likely to be, at best, imprecise, and as such be as much a matter of individual judgement as empirical investigation.

STRUCTURE AND FACILITATION OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
Given this relative complexity, how can we identify CoPs and indeed nurture them? Fuller et al. [10] argue that participation in communities will inevitably involve learning. Yet evidence presented by Culver and Trudel from CoP studies suggests that both structure and facilitation are required to support learning. Importantly, learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world [4], not just merely situated in practice. Participation in social practice therefore is a way of belonging to a community. This means that the processes, relationships and experiences which constitute the participants’ sense of belonging underpin the nature and extent of subsequent learning [10]. Therefore, it could be suggested that the nature of ‘manufactured’ and ‘facilitated’ CoPs are not engaging the coaches’ sense of belonging and perhaps exist for some coaches in a superficial sense.

LOCATING THE INDIVIDUAL
In addition to a sense of belonging, there is significance in how the individual is located in the CoP [5, 11]. Learning needs to become embodied in the context of engagement in practice, which itself is organised around trajectories of participation [5]. Engagement in practice and participation are linked to issues of power as already suggested, and also related to learner identity. Importantly, learner identity needs to be embedded in the context in which the individual is co-participating [4]. In essence, this means that engagement in CoPs will help form a person’s identity. However, this can be problematic as people come to coaching already formed with beliefs, understandings, skills and attitudes. People have what Pierre Bourdieu describes as dispositions and are not simply empty vessels waiting to be filled [3, 10]. Members of a given CoP will have become participants in the cultural practices of that community, but will experience it in an uneven fashion depending on their location within it and their disposition, and this experience in-turn will impact their learning.

CONCLUSION
The concept of communities of practice has much to offer us in understanding coach learning. Diane Culver and Pierre Trudel contribute meaningfully to the on-going discussion and debate concerning this concept. As we evolve our understanding, it is important to challenge the often assumed benign character of CoPs [10]. It is also important that we continue researching the composition and structure of CoPs, their production and reproduction. Given the complexity of coaching practice, and the complex interaction of power, position and disposition impacting learning in CoPs, it is also important that research pays attention to the specific circumstances of context and practice rather than be tempted to adopt a more generalised approach [10].
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INTRODUCTION

Learning is integral to coaching yet it has had an ambiguous status in the coaching literature [1,2]. However, since Gilbert [3] conducted his review there has been an increased interest in learning within the coaching context from a number of authors [1, 2, 4-7] and the 2006 Special Issue of this journal was focused on The Sport Coach as Learner. The current article by Culver and Trudel adds to this growing body of literature by clearly describing Wenger’s [8] concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) with the aim of developing some consistency in how the concept is operationalised in the sporting community. They also compare the concept of CoP with related notions, including action learning and action science, people networking, and sport organizations before concluding with three empirical studies that aimed to nurture coaches’ CoP.

THE CONCEPT OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (COP)

In describing the origins of CoP, Culver and Trudel drew on the doctoral work of Larocque [9] who constructed a genealogy of the concept. Due recognition was given to Lave’s [10] early anthropological work in which she recognised learning as being situated. It was from this work that she and Wenger explored the meaning of situated learning in a range of different contexts and proposed that learning was a process that involved being engaged in a “community of practice” [11]. Often it is with this work that the utilisation and discussion of CoPs begins and ends. What is particularly pleasing about Culver and Trudel’s article is that they continue to describe the development of the concept. Recognition of this development is important since Lave and Wenger [11] freely admitted that the concept of CoP was “left largely as an intuitive notion” that required “more rigorous treatment” (p.42). Culver and Trudel present Wenger’s [8] social theory of learning that provided a theoretical frame for the concept of CoP and identified three dimensions of practices required for the existence of a CoP; namely, the participants need to be mutually engaged in a joint enterprise in which they have a shared repertoire. It is particularly useful for those wishing to nurture CoPs with coaches and athletes to be cognisant of these three dimensions if productive CoPs are to be realised. Culver and Trudel also pointed to Wenger et al.’s [12] observation that despite informal CoPs having existed since the dawn of time (or thereabouts) they are unlikely to be sustainable in any systematic way without assistance and that “the most important factor in a community’s success is the vitality of its leadership” (p. 80). This has been documented in
the coaching context by Cassidy et al. [13] and Culver and Trudel [4] who found that while coaches benefited from the round table discussions with others in the community, they voiced the need for the facilitators to exert some control over the direction and length of the discussions if they were to be of optimal value.

COMPARISON OF CoP WITH RELATED NOTIONS

The heading of the second section suggested that there was to be a comparison between CoP and related notions, but the subsequent sub-headings set up potential dualisms by using the phrase “CoP versus…”. It may have been more generative had Culver and Trudel compared and contrasted the related notions with CoP. For example, they drew on Raclin’s [14] model of work-based learning, who utilised the term ‘Communities of Practice’; yet no time was spent comparing and contrasting how each scholar used the term. Similarly, it would have been of interest to have the terms “knowledge networks” or “networks of practice” compared and contrasted with Wenger’s [12] CoP. The final focus of the section was the examination of the sport organization versus the CoP. Here, Culver and Trudel pointed to the need to recognise that a sports team comprises at least two distinct CoPs, an athlete CoP and a coach CoP, and provided empirical examples. They could have developed this by, i) exemplifying Trudel and Gilbert’s [6] recommendations that different CoPs can find ways to work together and share the same enterprise; and ii) comparing and contrasting their examples with what Wenger [12] called ‘constellations’.

EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES OF NURTURING COACHES’ CoP

In the third section, Culver and Trudel provided a brief description of three empirical studies that were designed and analysed using the concept of CoP. While it was useful to be made aware of the studies, I felt this section did not readily reflect the focus of the article, namely to clarify the concept of CoP. Nevertheless, the first example [15] illustrated a study that was competently analysed and discussed in light of Wenger’s work [8, 12]. The second example highlighted the complexities associated with nurturing and facilitating a CoP in a hierarchical organization. While the observations were illuminating, it may have been useful (given the focus of the article) had there been a discussion of the limitations of CoP and a discussion of possible ways forward, since aspects of the three dimensions needed for a CoP were present in the karate club. The third example did not contribute very much to the section or the focus of the article since there was little information about how this particular study was designed or analysed using CoP. Also there was no evidence for the statement that the coaches believed the process to be beneficial and that they had learned individually and collectively.

CONCLUSION

Diane Culver and Pierre Trudel have provided us with a timely overview of the development of CoP. In doing so, they acknowledge the doctoral work of Larocque [9] who constructed a genealogy of the concept. I look forward to reading articles published from this emerging scholar’s work. I applaud Culver and Trudel’s desire to develop some consistency in the way the concept of CoP is utilised and discussed in the sport and coaching communities. Also laudable is the way Culver and Trudel drew on theory from parent disciplines as well as highlighting how the theory has developed from the oft-cited early work.

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INTRODUCTION

Culver and Trudel explore the feasibility of promoting sports coach development through facilitated peer-group discussions, making particular reference to Lave and Wenger’s ‘communities of practice’ (CoPs) [1, 2]. They demonstrate the difficulty of distinguishing CoPs from other forms of group engaged in ‘learning through doing’, such as action learners and informal networkers, and comment on coaches’ apparent reluctance (arguably due to the competitive traditions of their work-role) to engage in collegiate problem-solving with peers. They acknowledge a consequent need for coaches’ CoPs to be formally facilitated and given a degree of pedagogical structure that can “act as a scaffold for learning” (p. 7).

Their paper touches on dilemmas experienced by many other researchers who have sought to contextualise CoP theory (CoPT) in ‘real-life’ contexts. Investigators frequently report having to make a priori decisions as to which of several social groups most closely constitutes their participants’ primary CoPs; for example, see Mutch [3] and Fuller et al. [4]. A risk of such a priori decision-making, of course, is that it may be at variance with participants’ personal interpretations of group membership and loyalty. Another is that it arguably under-represents the extent to which a group’s shared dialogue and practices might reflect wider social influences. Culver and Trudel’s observation that CoPs may not work collegiately if left to themselves also echoes the findings of other studies [5, 6]. Indeed, reluctance to share information appears to be a common problem in meritocratic work settings. For example, in his writing on management dialogue processes, Stacey [7] argues that the open sharing of opinion can present very real threats to discussion-group participants, pointing out that careless talk can destroy careers. While Lave and Wenger do make reference to these sorts of problems in their writing, it has been argued that they do not do nearly enough to acknowledge and explore them [8, 9]. Recently [10], I suggested that they might be overcome by making reference to Elias’ theory of social development [e.g. 11, 12]. This commentary will seek to show how Elias’ ideas might be applied to the specific issues raised by Culver and Trudel. In doing so, it will make brief reference to qualitative data drawn from on-going research into the professional role of British basketball coaches.

ELIAS’ THEORY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Elias offers a long-term theory of human social development, a defining characteristic of which is his reference to ‘figurations’; that is to say, the networks of asymmetrical power balances that are created when individuals become bound to one another as a consequence
of their interdependency [13]. Put simply, Eliasian theory argues that individuals’ defensive reactions to what they perceive as social threats and social opportunities give rise to figurational movements that, over time, can be manifest as social change, including the long-term development of human societies. While Elias’ work is arguably best known for its application to macro-social processes, including the global development of sport [14, 15], it is equally applicable to the dynamics of small groups. Eliasian studies of interest to readers of this journal would include Kelly and Waddington [16] on the historical development of English football managers’ working styles, and Stokvis [17] on the commercialising of athlete-coach relations, in addition to recent publications of my own [10, 18]. What makes Elias’ theory of particular interest here is that it locates human subjectivity and practice in their cultural-historical context; that is to say, both are understood to emerge from and therefore reflect the learning of past generations. As such, it is compatible with Lave and Wenger’s own cultural-historical perspective, but has the added advantage of permitting us theoretical access to the micro-politics of situated learning. For example, Stokvis [17] refers to Elias’ views on the individualising of human identity [19] to argue that the encroaching commercialisation of sport is increasingly leading athletes to put self-interest ahead of their obligations to team-mates, coaches and clubs. While Stokvis explores these issues primarily through the eyes of athletes, his conclusion would, of course, be equally applicable to coaches, whose work is also becoming increasingly commercialised. His paper helps us to understand why the coaches described by Culver and Trudel might have been reluctant to engage in participative learning.

A FIGURATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON COPS

We must now consider how CoPs might be understood from an Eliasian perspective. In fact, there are notable similarities with Lave and Wenger’s interpretation. Both forms of theory would view learning as a process of ‘becoming’ in which individuals’ identities form reflexively as they engage with their social worlds. Both would recognise the significance of ‘we-groups’ in harnessing individuals’ commitment to collective forms of practice. Both would acknowledge the individual empowerment accruing to mastery of practice although, in Elias’ case, emphasis would also be placed on the ways in which social groups can exploit their shared allegiance to practice in a collective sense, to enhance their social standing [11, 12]. An example of the latter would be the ways in which dominant social classes enhance their prestige by promoting forms of ‘civilised’ or ethical behaviour [11].

However, there are also some significant differences between these theories. For example, in figurational terms there can be no boundaries between we-groups. While CoPT encourages us to view groups of learners as conceptually distinct from one another, Eliasian theory would stress their interdependence. While Wenger [2] theorises the boundaries of CoPs as ‘discontinuities’ between practices, Eliasian theorists would view them as social constructions, created and policed by we-group power-holders. Furthermore, the two forms of theory tend to stress different ‘faces’ of human engagement: while Lave and Wenger stress its collegiate dimensions, Eliasian theory acknowledges and explores social division. For example, Eliasian theorists would anticipate the presence of power differences even within peer groups reflecting, for example, participants’ varying length of membership or social class. They might also expect to find differences between members in their preferences for collective or individualistic forms of working. They would also recognise that more powerful members might benefit from denying ‘mastery’ to newcomers, a form of marginalisation referred to as ‘established-outsider’ relations [18, 20].
AN ELIASIAN RESPONSE TO CULVER AND TRUDEL

We can now offer an Eliasian response to the points made by Culver and Trudel. Clearly, an Eliasian theorist would have little difficulty interpreting sports coaches’ reluctance to engage in collaborative learning. Elias’ theory would direct us to the competitive traditions of the coaches’ profession, their individualised subjectivities and the possibility that they might be competing with their peers for preferment.

However, the question of what might legitimately constitute a CoP is more problematic. From an Eliasian perspective, this question would appear to divert attention from the real issue, namely that how, what and why coaches learn must depend on their individual figurational circumstances. For example, a figurational analysis would view coaches as dependent on, and owing obligations to, many individuals and groups, including families, athletes, other coaches, line managers, governing body representatives, and possibly also commercial sponsors and media groups. Depending on their past developmental histories, the organisations they work for may vary widely in their patterns of power distribution and in the development trajectories they offer their coaches. The societies they live in may vary in their traditions of social dominance and exclusion, and their historical preferences for collective or individualistic working. Consequently, given all of these varying influences, the learning trajectories open to individual coaches can be expected to vary widely. It is impossible to view any particular social configuration as invariably offering more and better learning than others.

This point can be illustrated with reference to my study of British basketball coaches [10, 18]. Within this sport, local clubs bear marked similarities to the CoPs described in Lave and Wenger’s early work [1]. Notably, six of seven male coaches interviewed to date appear to have followed, or are currently pursuing, developmental paths facilitated by clubs, taking them from active athletic involvement to working as junior or lower league coaches, to working as assistants to head coaches and eventually to assuming the head coach role itself. The single exception to the rule was a participant who wanted to move into American college coaching and also needed to build his academic qualifications. All participants acknowledged their clubs as key forums for learning. In particular, they emphasised the value of working as assistant to a good head coach, although it seemed that other club veterans, including senior players as well as club directors, could also be effective sources of support - when these individuals worked well together, the learning generated could benefit all concerned. Notably, no coaches interviewed made reference to learning from peers. When participants did refer to coaches outside their clubs, they invariably referred to learning from experienced coaches with high reputations, that is to say, individuals that Lave and Wenger might describe as ‘masters’. This apparent preference for learning from master coaches is at odds with Wenger’s promotion of non-hierarchical peer groups. It obliges us to question whether such groups are necessarily the most appropriate forum for facilitating coaches’ learning.

Be that as it may, Eliasian theorists would uphold Culver and Trudel’s stress on the value of facilitation and on the importance of social ‘scaffolding’. However, they would also emphasise the importance of carrying out a figurational analysis before devising a pedagogical solution. Facilitation then becomes a process of working to minimise the impact of factors restricting development while taking maximum advantage of those promoting it. For example, in the cases described by Culver and Trudel, Eliasian facilitators would look for ways of working with, rather than against, coaches’ desire for autonomy.
CONCLUSION

This commentary has attempted to show how Eliasian theory can be used to shed light on situated learning. However, a final question remains to be considered, namely: given that Eliasian theory is so helpful, does reference to CoPT offer us any added value? That is to say, do we need CoPT if we have Elias? It can certainly be claimed that Lave and Wenger have made an immensely significant contribution to the academic literature. In particular, they have highlighted the social significance of ‘everyday learning’ and demonstrated the importance of offering individuals legitimacy and acceptance as they work towards mastery. However, it can be argued that Eliasian theory does these things and more. For example, as this discussion has illustrated, it can be used to make connections between global social processes and the ways in which individuals value and exploit their learning opportunities; a task that Wenger’s theory may not be ideally suited for [2, p. 14].

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