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'It's an experiential thing': the discursive construction of learning in high-performance coach education

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ABSTRACT

The design and delivery of formal coach education and learning opportunities appear to be permeated by taken-for-granted discourses. These discourses exercise a systemised influence on the social construction of coaches' professional knowledge, with potentially problematic consequences. Adopting a discursive methodology using discourse analysis, this study explored the ways in which facilitators and coaches in a high-performance coach education programme constructed coach learning. Data were collected over a two-year period using on-course participant observation (10 days), interviews with coaches and course facilitators ($n = 29$), and document analysis. Findings indicated a dominant discourse of 'learning' as a linear, mechanistic and unproblematic process occurring independently of context, and of coaches as experiential learners, which positioned participants as anti-intellectual and uncritical adopters of 'what works'. These discourses functioned to reproduce relations of power between the facilitators (the holders of knowledge) and the participants (the recipients of knowledge). The impact of these discursive resources on programme design and delivery are discussed, alongside implications for elite coaches' subjectivity and practice, in order to confront dominant and legitimate 'truths' in coach education.

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Sport coaching is recognised as a social, relational and pedagogical activity, with research exploring concepts such as interaction, power, structure and agency (e.g. Cassidy et al., 2009; Cushion & Jones, 2014; Denison et al., 2017). Scholarship has highlighted that far from being value free, coaching and coaches' practices are influenced by micro-political workings (e.g. Thompson et al., 2013), and subject to social, cultural, political and economic factors (e.g. Chapman et al., 2019; Cushion et al., 2019; Paquette & Trudel, 2018). Likewise, in the area of coach learning, coach education and professional development, research has demonstrated the contested nature of knowledge and practice, with recent perspectives concerning the learning and professional development of sport coaches underlining social, relational, contextual and theoretical issues (e.g. Culver et al., 2019; Stodter & Cushion, 2019a; Williams & Bush, 2019). Rather than being 'empty vessels', coaches actively reject, resist, adapt, accept and interpret knowledge, beliefs and practices based on biography, context, culture and organisation (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Griffiths et al., 2018; Stodter & Cushion, 2019a, 2019b, 2017). As such, coaching practice can be understood to be shaped through relations of power and constructed through discourse (Denison et al., 2017). However, only recently has the role of discourse and relations of power in these settings been researched (e.g. Avner et al., 2017;

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Downham & Cushion, 2020; Mills & Denison, 2018), leading to calls for deeper critical analysis of the complex production of coaching knowledge (Williams & Bush, 2019). Problematising knowledge and discourse can enable the implications of learning practices to be uncovered, allowing practitioners to engage critically with these concepts while promoting enlightened and creative practice in coaching and coach education (Cassidy et al., 2009; Cushion, 2018).

Discourses are situated language practices or 'ways of knowing' which 'operate through our everyday practices' (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 49) allowing for certain knowledges or *truths* to be produced and understood (Foucault, 1981). The dominant discourses within coaching have powerful effects on practice. From a Foucauldian point of view, discourses become internalised and discipline coaches by foregrounding and privileging what is seen as 'expert' knowledge. Foucault suggests that this occurs through relations of power between individuals, where a person acts to structure another's 'field of action' (1982, p. 221). This reinforces normative practices and restricts practitioners from finding different ways of working. Innovative or progressive coaching, or thinking outside the prevailing discourses, can therefore be dismissed or even 'excommunicated', leading to reproduction of dogma and stagnation (Denison et al., 2017; Piggott, 2012). Dominant discourses identified in coaching include, for example, the discourses of 'science', 'performance', 'winning', 'philosophy', 'athlete-centredness', and reflection (Avner et al., 2017; Cushion & Jones, 2014; Downham & Cushion, 2020; Gearity, 2010; Grahn, 2014).

Importantly, education is a means through which particular discourses and knowledges can be formed, accepted and reproduced (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008; Jones et al., 2016). Indeed, Cushion et al. (2019) argue that coach development practices are ideological and reproduce current coaching practices, as opposed to challenging them. While Dempsey et al. (2021) suggest that this may include naïve claims to empower learners, but nonetheless impose the language and meanings representative of prevailing cultures. The promotion of certain things as truthful in curricula and teaching methods influence taken-for-granted practices around learning, securing social discipline (Jones et al., 2016). For example, there is a historical pervasiveness of the discourse of competence (cf. Chapman et al., 2019) – emphasising the skills, knowledge and understanding that go into performing particular activities – as a 'regime of truth' cemented by modern educational arrangements and structures (Edwards & Usher, 1994). Such practices form a disciplinary framework of surveillance and control over learners, who become compliant, uncritical and even self-regulating, while any other potential understandings of how a person might learn, for example outside the centrally predetermined competencies, become marginalised or dismissed as irrelevant (Edwards & Usher, 1994). In sport coaching, a Foucauldian lens has shown some of the rationalities and knowledges involved in formal coach education and coach learning (e.g. Avner et al., 2017; Downham & Cushion, 2020; Piggott, 2012), for example, dominant scientific discourses, and knowledges from sport physiology or sport medicine, alongside discourses of positive psychology and humanistic coaching. These conceptualisations imply assumptions and truths about effective coaching, which limit practitioners and encourage them to adopt rhetoric rather than effecting change (Avner et al., 2017).

Indeed, coaches' experiences of formal coach education showed that courses, despite claims to the contrary, exhibit a number of common features: a single style or formula for coaching; 'sacred texts' prescribing what and how to coach; 'rites of passage' from one level to the next; 'instrumental design' driven by passing of assessments, and on course 'time-crunch' limiting space for spontaneous discussion or challenge (Cushion, 2013; Dempsey et al., 2020; Piggott, 2012; Williams & Bush, 2019; *inter-alia*). Along with coach educators, who establish and protect their 'expert' power, such governing practices, can produce docile coaches prevented from criticising the status quo (cf. Cushion et al., 2019; Downham & Cushion, 2020; Stodter & Cushion, 2019a). Yet, the cause of the commonly reported issues with formal coach education are often simplified to the apparent disconnect between what is known about adult learning and the design and delivery of professional development opportunities. At present there is a 'lack of theorising in, or on coach learning' (Williams & Bush, 2019, p. 376). However, the productive use of theory, in this case Foucault,

shows us that formal coach education and coach learning appears to be permeated by problematic taken-for-granted discourse and ideologies (Avner et al., 2017; Downham & Cushion, 2020; Piggott, 2012). For example, course design and delivery reflect an, often implicit, learning ‘theory-in-use’ (Cushion, 2013), with ideas about how people learn best and what is good for them rather than evidence or theory. *Acquiring* knowledge from ‘experts’ and neatly packaged modules are based on the pervasive idea of coaching expertise following a linear novice-expert continuum, alongside cognitive/acquisition metaphors and bio-scientific rationalities (Cushion, 2013; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). A perspective described by Williams and Bush (2019, p. 376) that ‘produce a large, homogenous, predictable, controlled and an efficient coaching workforce reflecting neo-liberal sensibilities dictated by competition and self-interest (Bush et al., 2013)’. Such approaches exercise a systemised influence on the construction of coaches’ knowledge, producing particular discourses of learning and coaching. Yet, coach learning research lacks empirical evidence to explain and illustrate this complex production of discourse. Here, a focus on learning is crucial, alongside examination of the agency between the individual and learning activities, and key mediating meso (e.g. at an institutional/club level) and macro (e.g. at a systems/organisational level) structures (Culver et al., 2019; Culver et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2018; Paquette & Trudel, 2018). The investigation of discursive interactions and socially constructed communication has been recommended as encompassing these three areas, as offering increased explanatory power in considering what works in which contexts (Griffiths et al., 2018). Indeed, as Williams and Bush (2019) argue, ‘to contemplate changes for coach education, it is first necessary to identify the totalising pedagogical logic that constrains coach learning’ (p.376). Therefore, problematising the discursive interactions that reproduce coach education’s dominant discourses is a necessary step that can then allow work on and against ideological subjugation, foregrounding that which the dominant discourse seeks to repress (Avner et al., 2017; Edwards & Usher, 1994).

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to unpack and problematise some of the assumptions underpinning high-performance coach education; to identify the discursive construction of coach learning, and its associated practices reproducing discourses, and to challenge dominant pedagogical discourses and subjugated knowledges, rather than passively accepting taken-for-granted practices. Therefore, a critical examination of coach and coach educator accounts of a high-performance coach development programme was significant as it served the purpose of destabilising things about coach development that are currently and ordinarily taken for granted; to introduce awkwardness into the fabric of our experiences by making coach learning narratives ‘stutter’ (Nicoll & Fejes, 2008; cf. Downham & Cushion, 2020). This will, as Foucault (1996) asserts, ‘reveal relations of power ... and put them back into the hands of those who exercise them’ (p.144). Because ‘power does not just prevent things happening, it also produces effects’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 59), and such analysis enables coaches and coach education practitioners to acknowledge and critique relations of power, patterns of language, received knowledges and the values underpinning practices that can provide a catalyst for transforming the status quo in coach education (Denison & Avner, 2011).

Coaching discourses: a history of the present

For Foucault (1977), understanding contemporary operations of power requires some commentary on the historical and intellectual frameworks that influence thinking and practices. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of genealogy this means identifying the conceptual possibilities and discursive formations that determine the boundaries of thought in a given domain and understanding how these processes give shape to the present (Garland, 2014). Framing a study of coach learning, therefore, requires some commentary on its cultural grounding, that is, the historical and intellectual frameworks that influence thinking and practice.

Approaches to coaching and coach learning are historically situated in the wider academic and practical cultures of education, physical education and psychology (cf. Chapman et al., 2019). Coaching is a ‘hybrid discipline’ that reflects theoretical and practical struggles, as well as being a proxy for

debate about what constitutes legitimacy in learning (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Ideas related to positivism proliferated and are manifest through behaviourism which has had a pervasive legacy on coaching practice and shaping competency-based coach education. Behaviourism has been partly replaced by, and merged with, a cognitive paradigm (Light, 2008; Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Based on an assumption that we have universal cognitive structures, the human individual is 'cogito' an epistemic person unchanged by the construction of knowledge; hence, coaching identity is unchanged by new knowledge (Cushion, 2016). Recent scholarly and governing body developments have recognised the social character of learning (cf. Dempsey et al., 2020), but many 'constructivist' approaches mostly consist in a small 'aura' of socialness that provides input for the process of internalisation, but learning is still viewed as individualistic acquisition of the cultural given (Cushion, 2016) – learning begins and ends with the individual, with a 'nod' at the 'social' or the environment in between. Coaching effectiveness remains considered in terms of epistemology; changing knowing/knowledge 'structures' with explanations viewing coaching as a process by which the coach internalises and applies foundational or objective knowledge (e.g. Gilbert & Trudel, 2013), whether discovered, transmitted from others or experienced in interaction (Cushion, 2016).

A dominant discourse comprises a particular language, a distinctive worldview in which some things are regarded inherently more important or true than others; a set of concepts that are held in common by those participating in discourses; rules for what are judged good or bad contributions, and procedures that are applied to determine who may be allowed to join the discourse community (Brookfield, 2001; Markula & Silk, 2011). Dominant discourses inevitably support existing power structures; 'relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no exercise of power without a certain economy of discourse' (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). When particular discourses coincide and overlap, they comprise what Foucault (1980) calls a regime of truth. Here, truth does not indicate some inherent accuracy or empirical correctness; it describes the system that decides certain forms of discourse should be allowed.

A regime of truth in coaching is 'instrumental rationality', that is the manipulation and control of the environment, prediction about observable events, where coaching reality is based on empirical knowledge, and governed by technical rules (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). The extension of this rationality is to view coaching practice based on technical 'expertise' (e.g. Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), and in terms of abstract, universal categories, such as motivation or decision-making. Theory, from this perspective, is something that is applied to practice, with coaching cast as an applied 'coaching science'. Consequently, coaching's cultural grounding is in discourses of positivist scientific knowledges and instrumental rationality (Avner et al., 2017) with coaching and coach learning understood as 'an individual, asocial, ahistorical process' (Cushion, 2016, p. 2). This, alongside a pervasive and dominant 'psychologism' (Downham & Cushion, 2020), remains influential in coaching practice, curricula design and coach education.

Methodology

Setting

Following ethical approval, participants were recruited from a high-performance coach education initiative. The aim of the three-year programme was to develop coaches working at a 'world class' level (Olympic, Paralympic or International) across a range of sports to become 'world leading'. Coaches were nominated by their sport's governing body, before completing an intensive assessment and selection process involving multiple interviews and third-party feedback (including athletes), that identified prospective participants' current knowledge, experience and future aspirations. Cohorts of up to 10 coaches were selected each year to participate. The key learning activities of the programme included:

- Coach cohort residentials (two-day themed events, designed to spark debate, discussion and knowledge development through peer-to-peer interaction)
- Coach support specialist meetings (opportunities for one-to-one mentoring with an executive coach)
- Coach journal (tracking log to review progress and reflect on the future)

Data collection

Data were collected using multiple methods that included qualitative interviews, participant observation of programme residentials and document analysis (including programme materials, planning documentation, review meeting minutes, programme and unit outlines and outcomes, course data, evaluations and reviews). To identify the discursive construction of coach learning, dominant pedagogical discourses and subjugated knowledges, the study drew upon a 3-stage design where data were collected over a two-year period in three main phases:

Phase 1: participant observation

Observation of programme residentials ran across two years with five residential workshops (10 days, approximately 100 hours) observed in total. Being present during the programme was part of an 'independent evaluation', to gain participant reflections and inform future iterations. This, alongside regular attendance, supported a non-partisan position which produced a mutual trust and familiarity with the participants as a legitimate liminal social position was developed. While not downplaying the challenges of fieldwork (cf. Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Berger, 2015), this positioning cemented both 'entry' to the programme as well as 'access' to coaches (C) and facilitators (F). Each residential ran for two days and included lecture style sessions, group work and practical activities. Field notes were made throughout these observations and included detailed descriptive information, such as the location, timings, who was present, what social interaction occurred and what activities took place.

Phase 2: interviews

Fifteen participant coaches (C) and fourteen facilitators (F) (programme staff, course tutors, coach support specialists and residential content deliverers) involved in the programme took part in individual semi-structured interviews to produce discursive accounts (Harré, 1999). The coach interviews took place during year two and were conducted at the coach's convenience in terms of time and location. This meant that interviews were conducted both 'away' from the programme and during residentials. The interviews conducted during the residentials were undertaken outside the timetabled sessions and at a different location to the programme. The interview questions were designed to encourage discussion about, and reflection on, experiences of the programme, including design, content and delivery, and how/what was perceived to have been learnt from participating in learning activities. This enabled participants to explain the meanings they constructed from their experiences and describe their perspectives and behaviours in relation to the programme. Interviews lasted between 42 and 85 minutes the average was 58 minutes – generating approximately 28 hours of interview material.

Phase 3: document analysis

Document analysis was carried out across the duration of the project and encompassed materials from the programme including course materials, planning documentation, review meeting minutes, programme and unit outlines and outcomes, and in-house course evaluations. As no texts are neutral and value-free conveyors of information (Cheek, 2004) the analysis attempted to understand how these artefacts were shaped discursively, and how discourses framed their assumptions and understanding. That is, the image of an object, i.e. coach learning, as represented in a text

was formed according to the frame or focus determining what is to be seen in the first place. Analytical questions that were considered included 'Why was this said, and not that?' 'Why these words?' and 'Where do the connotations of the words fit with different ways of talking about the world?' (Parker, 1992, p. 4). In line with the research's broader discourse analysis, the materials and documents were interrogated to uncover the unspoken and unstated assumptions implicit within them that shaped the very form of the text in the first place.

Overall, the design of the study facilitated the linking of data from different sources and over time, allowing an identification of discursive layers. Following Cushion et al. (2019), this approach resulted in layers of collaborative evidence that was used to increase understanding but was no guarantee of 'validity' in traditional terms.

Data analysis

Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2008) was used to examine the discourses that shaped the programme. Importantly, discourses do more than describe, they are practices that structure and shape our social world and constrain what can be said, who can say it and how people may act and conceive of their own agency and subjectivity (Parker, 1992). Discourses in this case were scaffolds of discursive frameworks that ordered reality on the programme in a certain way. The analysis was concerned with the discursive production of meaning, which constructed and was constructed by ideas about coach learning. In addition to identifying the available discursive resources within the context of the programme, the analytical technique allowed for an understanding of the implications of discourses on subjectivity and practice. This was considered a potential strength of the method, as it enabled a focus upon how discourses shaped, and were shaped by, coaches' experiences of learning and programme design and delivery. The six analytical steps outlined by Willig (2008) were followed:

Stage 1: discursive construction

All transcripts and texts were read and re-read to become familiar with the data. To identify the ways in which coach learning was discursively constructed, explicit and implicit references to coach learning, education or development within the texts were highlighted.

Stage 2: discourses

For each highlighted section of text, the ways in which coach learning was constructed were described. To interpret the discourses and the connections between them, constructions were compared and contrasted, and considered in relation to wider cultural discourses (e.g. professionalisation of coaching, sport performance, development, and reflective practice). As this process was completed a thematic structure of discourses and descriptive labels was developed. This was continually amended and added to during the analysis.

Stage 3 and 4: action orientation and positionings

To understand why coaches or facilitators may have drawn on certain discourses, the function or action-orientation of constructions were analysed by examining what was achieved from invoking a particular discourse at specific points. In addition the subject positions made available for both coaches and facilitators through the discursive constructions were explored. Subject positions were defined as 'a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire' (Davis & Harre, 1999, p. 35). Discursive locations can limit or enable the positions from which people can speak or act. In this stage of the analysis, it was important to move beyond descriptions of learning activities or personal preferences, in considering how the discourses positioned coaches in ways that had implications for what they could say or do.

Stage 5 and 6: practice and subjectivity

The relationship between discourses and practice (behaviours or actions), and discourses and subjectivity, were considered by identifying the implications of the discursive constructions for coaches' experiences of the programme, and the design and delivery of the programme. How these practices in turn reproduced the discourses that legitimated them was then examined.

Analysis and discussion

Learning as a mechanistic process

In the present study, these dominant discourses framed coaching and positioned learning as a benevolent, linear, and progressive transfer of knowledge (cf. Avner et al., 2017; Denison et al., 2017; Usher & Edwards, 2005). Learning was understood and presented as a transactional and mechanistic process involving the acquisition of knowledge from an 'expert' or an 'approved' source of expertise. Indeed, certain 'educators/experts' speaking authoritatively about aspects of coaching was premised on the authority of the discourse from which their expertise was both derived and, in turn, legitimated. Individuals were positioned as 'legitimate enunciators' (Foucault, 1972) sanctioned to be taken seriously and to be thought of as knowing the truth (cf. Gearity, 2010). For coaches, this meant being, paradoxically, an 'active [responsible] learner' while passively occupying a position to absorb uncritically expert information and advice. Consequently, it was the responsibility of coaches to absorb experts' knowledge and expand themselves as learners. As a coach suggested, 'I think we have to take responsibility for what we get out of it'. This perspective of learning remained an unquestioned truth throughout the programme. Therefore, a key discourse was of learning as a mechanistic process led by 'legitimate enunciators', wherein coaches unproblematically added 'nuggets' of knowledge (cf. Cushion, 2013; Stodter & Cushion, 2019b). Indeed, one course facilitator referred to this process using a particularly stark modernist analogy, likening learners to computers, with learning the addition of new applications:

If you think of you as an iPad effectively. You've got different skills, which are kind of 'Apps' that you can add to, so you can learn something new, you can add a new App to your system. But at some point, you need to upgrade your operating system to be able to run the latest Apps. (F)

A pervasive mechanistic, linear construction of learning was accepted on the course as self-evident truth, with coaches frequently talking about acquiring knowledge as 'another tool in the box' that they could subsequently 'bring out' in practice. In effect, this discourse fragmented coaching knowledge into neatly packaged items positioned primarily as 'things' to be taken away from the course and used. Importantly, this meant that learning was separated from the context in which it was to be applied – an autonomous act involving knowledge acquisition (Cushion, 2016; Denison et al., 2017). For instance, one participant was typical in describing a clear break between practice and his learning process, which comprised 'getting a few tools from the information that you get. Then get back to coaching and practice some of those things.' This framed learning as an additive, uncomplicated input-output process, firmly grounding coach learning in a discourse of modernity (cf. Denison et al., 2017). Such an approach provided what Denison et al. (2017) suggest as a disciplinary setting (discussed below), but also content (what knowledge was legitimate) and practices (how this knowledge was disseminated), were left unexamined as 'the way things were'.

A linear, mechanistic framework for the production and dissemination of coaching knowledge is not neutral but has profound implications for power relations (Avner et al., 2017; Denison et al., 2017). For example, the 'expert' coach developers are positioned as the interface and transmitters of expertise, with participant coaches as the points of application and as resources to be developed (Denison et al., 2017). This is not to be critical of the knowledge presented or to determine 'right' from 'wrong', rather the discursive analysis unpicked what it was possible to know, say and do within the programme and who could claim to be the knower. An understanding of subjects

-serving an ‘enunciative function’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 56) of discourse also provided an insightful analytical tool, showing legitimate and illegitimate ‘learning’ identities. That is, focusing on what practices and discursive knowledges acted to delegitimise particular coach behaviours or dispositions. For example, coaches’ resistance or refusal of prescribed thinking, taking risks, being challenging; or deemed ‘passive’, or unreflective as coach learners. While such behaviours were positioned as *un-professional*, the discourse acted to *de-professionalise* by positioning coaches as ‘technicians’ collecting objectified knowledge as a tool to fix problems (Cushion et al., 2003; Denison et al., 2017), circumventing wider learning potential (Williams & Manley, 2016). Indeed, these characteristics fitted with an instrumental, technocratic model of knowledge consumption and application, which discouraged alternative or organic ways of practicing (Taylor & Garratt, 2013), running counter to coaches’ learning and practice as messy, highly complex and context-dependent (e.g. Jones et al., 2014; Stodter & Cushion, 2017).

In line with current conceptions of coach education, the mechanistic learning discourse emphasised the additive; ‘trying to help build on the things that you need to build on’ (C), a ‘retooling’ according to behavioural assumptions. Rather than constituting a critically transformative experience that could alter participants’ taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, values and frames of reference (Cushion, 2013; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Coaches were left to pick and choose which ‘tools’ or knowledge to graft onto their existing repertoire, uncritically adopting ‘what works’ while dismissing other options.

Paradoxically, this instrumental approach existed alongside a cross-current of ‘learner-centred’, humanistic discourse that appeared to ‘empower’ coaches to learn according to their own perceived needs (cf. Downham & Cushion, 2020).

There is a structure, but because the individual coach needs different levels of support on different topics, it’s much more bespoke and so it moves for different people in different ways. (F)

However, this learning was subject to observation and surveillance through a normalising gaze assessing what was ‘permitted or forbidden’ (Denison et al., 2017).

We try to manage and measure on a constant basis. (F)

We check the review that is completed where the coach is expected to reflect on the learning from coach sessions, and from the diary as well as the residentials. (F)

Learning activities were experienced as a performance where the coaches were carefully watched by the ‘judges of normality’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 304), subject to ‘a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify to classify and to punish’ (Foucault, 1979, p.184) ensuring the ‘universal reign of the normative’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 304). The significance of a norm was that it worked by excluding, defining a standard and criteria of judgement thus identifying those who did not meet the standard. In this way, a picture was provided of what ‘good coaching’ is and correspondingly where coaches were ‘lacking’. On the programme this meant that ‘the judges of normality are present everywhere’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 304):

We need to know about what’s going on, what he’s (coach) doing day-to-day. I’m monitoring the diary regularly. (F)

He (coach) would put everything on there (the diary), but I want it to be his choice rather than ... you don’t always know when you ask a question quite what’s going to be triggered. And I’m aware one of the people who have access to the diary also could take them off the programme. So, there’s a conflict actually of interest in who has access to the diary. For some it may hold them back from using it as reflectively as they could do, as the content is being judged. As an example, I think [staff member] has the authority to take somebody off the programme if they’re not delivering what’s expected. (F)

Therefore, through regulated ideas of coach ‘competence’ (Denison & Mills, 2014) and in adopting ‘what works’ in line with dominant meanings about ‘correct’, ‘normal’ and ‘effective’ coaching, the programme created an environment for coaches to become conforming and docile. Disciplinary

matrices create docile bodies and minds ‘that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved (Foucault, 1977, p. 136) and where ‘training’ extends capacity and usefulness. Docility could be both productive and perhaps desirable for coaches to not only stay involved with the programme but also to progress in coaching more broadly as they were judged for progression not just on their achievements but also according to their perceived ‘fit’:

Selection onto the programme considered (Sport Organisation) interests and always asks whether coaches will “help mould the system the right way” not just bring medal potential. We consider if the coach brings potential threats to the organisation’s and programme’s reputation, from what they do, who they work with, as well as how they perform. (F)

Docility, however, does not necessarily mean optimal performance or achieving one’s potential (Denison, 2010). Docility can limit the development of skills and qualities, such as problem solving, decision making, and understanding capacities and capabilities (e.g. Mills & Denison, 2013). Importantly, in this case, what counted as *improved* was shaped and supervised by the facilitators and the organisation. The implication being that coaching ‘expertise’ became not a matter of what the coach could do or knew (c.f. Gilbert & Côté, 2013), but an articulation of the way they saw, thought and even felt, and the socialised meanings ascribed to these (Downham & Cushion, 2020; Gilbert, 2001). Thus, the ‘effective’ coach, who developed their abilities on the programme, was a function of the production of institutionalised and discursive bodies. Crucially, this was in opposition to the intended purpose of the course, existing coaching practices were reinforced, and innovative learning was silenced, while the programme acted to produce uncritical reproduction of dominant discourses about coach learning and coaching practice.

Experiential learners and learning

Foucault (1981) argues that there can be contradictory discourses within the same strategy, and they can circulate from one to another opposing strategy. Experiential learning was a discourse that constructed coaches and the programme, at the same time operating as a paradoxical and contradictory discourse within competing strategies. The programme and coaches were constructed on a strong preference for experiential learning which was valorised on the course.

That’s how they (high-performance coaches) learn. It’s an experiential thing’. (F)

They (high-performance coaches) like doing stuff. They’re more doing and pragmatist, you know, doing something and how does this apply in my world as a coach’. (F)

Interviewer: ‘How do you think coaches learn best?’

C: ‘Well, on the job, doing practical things.’

According to Foucault (1980), power relations are infinitely diverse and contextual. A ‘dominant group’ does not set out to create a set of mechanisms of control designed to bolster its authority, instead recognising that specific practices have become ‘advantageous and politically useful’ (p. 101). To maintain a system, a specific configuration of power relations and practices emerges that can be co-opted to support the functioning of that system. This serendipitous configuration is seized upon and incorporated to serve ends that are often contradictory (Brookfield, 2001). For example, Foucault (1980) suggests that experiential learning represents a subjugated knowledge, one of,

a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate in their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. (p. 82)

However, experiential learning in this case presented a set of circumstances ripe for co-opting in support of different strategies. For programme facilitators, experiential learning, a potentially ‘oppositional practice’ (Denison et al., 2017; Usher & Edwards, 1994), became annexed and taken back into

the fold of dominant discourses, where learning became a powerful and oppressive discourse as certain forms of experience became more valued than others. For example, de-contextualised non-sporting experiences were valued, legitimised and delivered in an alternative 'expert' setting away from coaches' day-to-day work. Activities included 'adventurous training' or observing other professionals in a non-sport so-called 'performance environment', such as the police, military or industry. These key learning activities provided a significant focus for residential (in terms of allocated time). Such experiences were purportedly designed to take coaches 'out of their comfort zone' or to encourage reflection on expertise:

You get in perspectives or expertise which you've got a good hunch will, even if it's coming from a different angle, will develop useful insight for the participants. (F)

To see excellence and how it is delivered in other walks of life and what they can then take away from that and apply into their walk of life, perhaps broadens their mindset around looking further afield to get innovative ideas for their own sport. (F)

(Police training) because, again, it takes you out of your comfort ... it took me totally out of my comfort zone and I did the abseiling, which I was absolutely not happy about. (C)

However, external practical activities and experts still positioned the coach subject within a learning setting. Such arrangements embodied discipline through hierarchical observation and provided certain possibilities for truth:

Field notes – Residential (Police Training Centre)

Police staff gave feedback on each coach's performance and asked questions about the coaches' experience of the tasks. Some discussion occurred around how the leader's role is to keep the bigger picture in mind and trust their team to do their job. However, the majority of feedback provided is technical focused (e.g. abseiling technique or weapon handling) and the staff gave the coaches a grade on their abilities.

These external activities were considered 'innovative' and 'empowering' by the course organisers besides being enjoyable for coaches. While certainly creating 'different discursive possibilities' (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 91), these tasks nonetheless served to reconfigure the regulation of the coaches who were subject to 'immediate scrutiny and surveillance' (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 91) by peers, coach developers and external experts/organisers as 'judges of normality' (Foucault, 1977, p. 304). Importantly, changing educational practices and locations in this way does not do away with power but displaces and reconfigures it in different ways.

In contrast, yet importantly, experiential learning served to privilege coaches' lived experience. For coaches, 'learning by doing' established that practical experience, accrued over several years, constituted legitimate knowledge in this setting. Such discourse positioned the coaches as 'experts' in the field, where every-day experiences should be taken as seriously as knowledge codified and transmitted by other means (Usher & Edwards, 1994). This could then negate the power of external experts. However, only those with a discipline-validated truth are power-knowledge formations, and thus regulatory in their impact (Foucault, 1980). Disciplinary truth and regulatory disciplining power are co-implicated; by fixing subjects within classifications, they become disciplined through labels according to disciplinary regimes of truth, such as, 'expert', 'good', 'effective', 'normal', 'correct'. The regime of truth in this case, that high-performance coaches were experts, was implicated with a truth that 'new' knowledge had to come from outside of the sport domain. Hence, rather than empowering, experiential learning practices were disciplinary and regulating, and served to direct and monitor coaches' thoughts and behaviours to conform with the programme's dominant meanings of what was 'expert knowledge' and who was an expert – outside of sport.

We're getting the best people coming in from around the world to talk to us. A lot of it is sport, about business and life and all sorts ... we've got some of the best world leading people in that environment coming to talk to us. (C)

Interviewer: 'How did you put together the programme?'

By introducing new ideas from recognised outside experts. So, one of the main learnings was that the knowledge and new ideas and challenge of experts is important in change management. (F)

We've also had a lot of different experts coming from different industries, talking about themselves and their philosophy, if you like, their leadership philosophies in their industries.(C)

This discourse cemented, rather than challenged, a problematic assumption of what learning was and needed to be, consequently generating a normalising influence that created compliant uncritical learners (Denison & Avner, 2011). Experience (including that of the coaches) was transformed into a commodity that could be fragmented and exchanged (Brookfield, 2001; Usher & Edwards, 1994), a regulatory regime of knowledgeable practice through which power was exercised.

Discourses like experiential learning can be considered as terrains occupied by a number of shifting, conflicting points of view. At a surface level, people may appear to be agreeing in their use of concepts, but underneath conflicting values, assumptions and strategies are at work (Usher & Edwards, 1994). In this study, experiential learning discourse appeared in this way, while different groups involved with the programme struggled over their own particular meanings and constructions. As Denison et al. (2017) argue, this *still* results in coaches becoming tied to specific ways of being and thinking, so 'even when many coaches believe they are thinking 'outside' the box, so totalizing is coaching's dominant discursive formation that they fail to recognize how they are actually still thinking within that box' (p. 780).

Coaches 'don't need the theory'

The dominance of experiential learning discourse included marginalisation of the role of theoretical knowledge in learning. In different ways, coaches and facilitators downplayed the usefulness of theory:

Some of them do like theory but I don't think they all necessarily need to have, or are sort of saying, 'give me the theory behind this'. Some are, but not all of them. (F)

It's more the real thing rather than just again being academic. You get to a stage in your life where it's the real practical challenges that are going to change you the most. You can't learn it in the books I'm afraid. (C)

Through discourses of experience coaches and facilitators attempted to repress certain conceptions of knowledge and understanding to sustain an agenda where 'experiential learning' was the appropriate response. The discourse of 'science' or theory was positioned as separate from 'coaching', acting to legitimise knowledge from practical experience (cf. Townsend & Cushion, 2015). Thus, a regime of truth was established that derided certain forms of knowledge as irrelevant to effective coaching, privileging gaining experience as the necessary response.

The programme has evolved based on a range of things we know about coaching and learning, drawn mainly from elite level knowledge of practice. Really, this is only gained and taught through the practical experiences of exceptional individuals. (F)

The veiling of certain types of knowledge as 'theory' to be removed or absent from coach education curriculum found support among coaches. However, a consequence of constructing coaches as experiential learners worked to position coaches, and coaching, as anti-intellectual (cf. Cushion et al., 2019). This self-disciplining 'theoretical tyranny ... privileging practice without due consideration of the complex interactions that mark the totality of theory/practice and language/meaning relationships' (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 92) served to deny coaches autonomy and the right to be critical, arguably the defining characteristics of a profession (Usher & Edwards, 2005).

This greater emphasis on the notions of 'practice' where 'theory' was subordinated was reflected in trying to position the programme within wider educational discourses.

We are in the process of looking at academic accreditation for this course. But with a wary eye to this, looking at both universities and something like a Business School, but we don't want to be slanted straight back to academia, because these people are coaches and they're doing world leading coaching. So that's where we are. (F)

This subordination extended to programme arrangements and assessment, which had an emphasis on practice to which theory was subordinated and instrumental. The coaches were subject to an ongoing monitoring and self-monitoring of their experience and practice, about which the 'guidance' and subsequent products severely limited possibilities for alternative and resistant discourses.

'I fill in the online diary religiously. I'll always put something in there. But on the last course we got basically a whole session telling us how we should fill it in, and what should be covered.' (C)

'So, they have an opportunity to reflect in an electronic journal that's secure and seen by them, by their coach support specialists and by me. And that's a really integral part of learning.' (F)

'It was made very clear that people were expected to fill in the diary.' (F)

However, there were occasions where coaches deviated and indicated a need for theory to substantiate knowledge from a non-sport expert:

'I found I wanted to ask some questions, but we were a bit rushed on what the scientific backup of it was, as I felt that wasn't particularly clear. I sort of disengaged from him (the presenter) a little bit.' (C)

Again, a paradox arose, problematising non-domain specific knowledge, yet aligning with this position enabled coaches to dismiss 'learning from books'.

'I've been coaching twenty-one years and so coaching by a book ... I'd be lying ... but you become eccentric and focused so like, this is how I do my work.'

Both worked to establish practical experience as legitimate coaching knowledge and combined the anti-intellectual culture with a socially authoritarian desire to assert control over the value and outcomes of experience.

Locating the discourse of experiential learning in context shows how different groups were able to articulate cultural assumptions and strategies within the contestable terrain it offered. Indeed, the discourse of experiential learning as both an effect and condition of coach education made it a central object in power relations, and experiential learning positioned as 'learner-centred' provided opportunities for disciplining of the whole subject.

Experts learn from experts – self and others

A further core assumption within experiential learning discourse was that coaches learn from 'the self and others' through discussion and reflection. This discourse justified the course design and cohort structure, enabling the inclusion of reflection and discussion activities following practical activities, as well as one-to-one meetings. Participants embraced the ideas of sharing and working with other coaches:

It's been great to mix with other coaches and even just sharing the experiences from each other's sports and the support you get from the cohorts has been fantastic. That's where you probably get most of the learning as well. (C)

Experiential learning was positioned within a humanistic discourse of 'learner-centred'. That is, coaches were given the opportunity to engage in their own understanding, where learning was seen as 'authentic', thus accruing choice and therefore power over their own development. Coaches were deemed to be self-directed, exercising individual agency and 'empowered', to make sense of experiential learning activities in establishing their own meaningful connections to practice – ossifying a regime of truth that this type of learning was empowering (Usher & Edwards, 2005). However, Lăzăroiu (2013, p. 822) argues that 'modern pedagogies are secular technologies of the self in which self-regulation and self-examination occupy centre ground'. Thus,

knowledge and expertise are conditional upon, and a condition of, the exercise of power, even as it is presented as a positive or empowering process.

Disciplinary power exhibits both spatial and temporal dimensions (Foucault, 1977) and while coaches were 'empowered' and worked 'collaboratively', as learners they were separated, and their learning seen as an individual act of intellectual and physical labour. The programme was highly organised in terms of time and space where time was broken into 'separate and adjusted threads' (Foucault, 1977, p. 158). Consequently, coaches' learning, and their professional practice were detached from one another, and the timetable became the pivotal reference point for the organisation of activities.

Field Notes - Residential

09:05–12:10 staff gave feedback on each coach's performance. Some discussion occurred around how decision-making and observation is a learnt, context-specific skill and how the leader's role is to keep the bigger picture in mind and trust their team to do their job. The session overruns (was scheduled to finish at 11:00).

12:10–12:35 Facilitated session to 'apply reflection on tasks into learning'. 12:35–13:05 The 'day in the life' session, where each coach described their typical day in small groups, was shortened from the planned 90 minutes to 30 minutes, meaning little time (ironically) for coaches to analyse their time management.

Activities were designed to be 'learner centred', creating personal 'learning journeys' and included reflection/discussion, individual mentor sessions, and developing learning/reflective diaries. Practices focusing on the self in this way can be regarded as constituting a technology of the self – externally imposed discipline has given way to the self-discipline of an autonomous subjectivity (Foucault, 1981) where the learner is made visible, power is rendered invisible, and the learner sees only the tasks and tests which they must undertake as a subject in the 'eye of power' (Foucault, 1980). Indeed, individualising learning in this way can be interpreted as instances of disciplinary power that helps the system 'be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities and merits' (Foucault, 1977, p. 143). Moreover, self-surveillance is the most important component of disciplinary power and those under surveillance are subject to the 'principle of compulsory visibility ... [which] assures hold of the power that is exercised over them' (Foucault, 1977, p. 187). Through the discourse and practice of reflection coaches became their own overseers with criteria for judging the worth of their work:

'Journaling is really a good way of self-learning, getting your thoughts out.' (C)

'They've got me talking into one of these because, at first, they wanted us to type like a diary and I never got away with that because I'm not the best. So, I actually talk into my phone, and I record my thinking to play-back and share.' (C)

In this case, reflection was seen and accepted as essential and a self-evident part of learning and the professional practice of an 'expert':

'Asking people what actions they've taken or what reflections they've had since the previous residential. Hearing them talk about real life situations where they've applied the learning gives evidence and demonstrates their learning and expertise.' (F)

'I think, oh God, I haven't done that (reflection), I need to do that, it's an important part of the job.' (C)

'Had we not had the journal, I'm not sure that we'd have been able to get a good quality reflection. But because we've had the journal, we have been able to get good quality reflection going. But it's been a combination of conversations and me being able to read their journal and find patterns.' (F)

As these data show, a key premise was that the coaches' knowledge needed to be made visible and this was through public discussion, a reflective journal or in one-to-one sessions. Through such reflective practice coaches contributed their knowledge and confessed to others (Fejes, 2011; Foucault, 1981; cf. Downham & Cushion, 2020). Indeed, these practices throughout the programme created an 'obligation to confess' (Foucault, 1981, p. 60; Rolfe & Gardner, 2006). By making

knowledge visible – by disclosing themselves – coaches were objectified and made visible for scrutiny and assessment, and this process constituted the coach as a ‘reflective practitioner’ (Cushion, 2018; Fejes, 2011). However, power worked to position coaches hierarchically, for example in terms of their ‘experiences’, ‘coachability’ or ‘learner identity’ while internalising the norm of a good learner. Reflection, therefore, was a discursive concept that shaped coaches, through practices of confession, verbal and written, as active subjects where they disclosed their knowledge and experiences in a dialogue with themselves and to others (cf. Downham & Cushion, 2020; Fejes, 2013). Consequently, reflection, through the workings of power, was a means of normative control (Fejes, 2013) of coaches’ professional identity and practice (cf. Downham & Cushion, 2020). Rather than empowerment or development of individuals, reflection constituted a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault, 1995). The coaches were shaped into conforming to on-course discourses about coaching, learning and ‘expertise’, and found it difficult, if not impossible, to stand outside these and see them for what they were (Johns, 1999, p. 242). Consequently, creative or progressive thinking was silenced with almost no space for learning to generate alternative views, knowledge or practices, leaving dominant discursive formations untouched (Cushion, 2018; Denison et al., 2017).

Implications

Foucault (1991a) argued that analysis should not generate advice, guidelines or instruction as to what is to be done, and rather than produce recipes for action seek instead to unsettle what is taken-for-granted (cf. Downham & Cushion, 2020). Therefore, rather than lead directly to suggestions for improvement or offer solutions, the idea is to make visible to coach education ‘policy makers’, coach developers, and coaches a different destabilised and problematised version of coach learning. As Downham and Cushion (2020) and Avner et al. (2017) argue, this approach is in direct contrast to research that presents and perpetuates particular discourses of coach learning but fail to recognise relations of power – power that is not acknowledged in everyday policy making and practices of coach developers, coach education, or research into it. These discourses (as the data in this case suggest) posit that coaches learn best by doing, and experiential learning is a familiar, often unquestioned notion within coach education literature, theory and practice. Positioned in, and informed by, wider educational practices it is perhaps unsurprising that such findings align with wider Foucauldian readings of examples in adult education concerning vocationalism, experiential learning and ‘competency-based’ education (e.g. Usher et al., 2006); with contemporary scholars showing the way learning and education have been appropriated by neoliberal discourses as governmental technologies (e.g. Edwards, 2003; Hodge & Harris, 2012).

The accounts presented in this study suggest that broad notions of ‘experiential learning’ were evoked on the programme and were a dominant but contradictory discourse that acted to regulate and categorise coaches and facilitators according to how they talked about and legitimated different types of ‘experience’ and learning. This meant that on the programme what was constructed as valuable in experience and learning was reformulated into dominant and contested discourses of experiential learning. This resulted in other forms of knowledge and the role of theory being undermined, dismissed, silenced, or marginalised, as ‘irrelevant’, or ‘academic’. As a result, such discourses became reified and confirmed through repeated social practices; embedded in the programme, to assume what Foucault (1980) calls a status of truth. Alongside the discourse of coaches as experiential learners, a discourse of ‘learning’ presented an individual, linear, mechanistic and unproblematic process, that occurred independently of context. Taken together, these discourses had the unintended consequences of positioning participants as anti-intellectual (cf. Cushion et al., 2019) and uncritical adopters of ‘what works’ (cf. Stodter & Cushion, 2019a, 2019b). As a result, and paradoxically, while developing practical competence, coaches relinquished a capacity for contextualising and reflexively understanding their practices. Indeed, coaches were ‘reflective’ not reflexive, where discussion of coaching practice became a process of rationalising and reconfirming ideas (cf. Cushion et al., 2019).

While the programme positioned learning and pedagogy discourses as free from power, Foucault helps 'read' these alternatively as mechanisms of power where individuals are governed and govern themselves within relations of power. Thus, the research enables us to see how notions of 'learner-centred' coach learning as 'neutral' and 'empowering' can be misguided. Moreover, the research shows that the programme was embroiled with intrinsic relations of power, and intentions of being 'neutral' and 'empowering' may in fact exacerbate rather than ameliorate the disciplinary workings of power (cf. Nicoll & Fejes, 2008). An implication therefore lies in not accepting passively 'what we do', but as Foucault (1980) suggests, emancipating local discursivities and subjugated knowledges to 'render them ... capable of opposition and of struggle against hegemonic discourses' (p.85). As Avner et al. (2017) argue, simply injecting a different rhetoric into existing frameworks is unlikely to challenge dominant discursive formations of coaching and learning without being accompanied by a problematisation of the power relations that produce coaching's dominant discourses. In other words, there is a need to consider critically the discursive complexities of coach learning and to challenge notions of learning portrayed repeatedly in coaching as an unbiased and objective process that occurs in a politically neutral environment (cf. Downham & Cushion, 2020).

Importantly, and as Foucault reminds us, such 'critique doesn't have to be the premise of deduction which concludes, this then is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is' (1991a, p. 84). In other words, this research contributes to a 'practical critique' in the form of transgression (Foucault, 1991b, p. 45), or what Biesta (1998b, 2008) has called counter-practice. As Downham and Cushion (2020) argue, in coaching thinking in terms of counter-practice helps resist the temptation to 'fix' policy or practice. Instead, the critical work of counter-practice consists of showing that the 'way things are' is only one (limited) possibility (Biesta, 2008), opening up the opportunity for coaches and coach developers 'of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think' (Foucault, 1991b, p. 46). However, this does not position programmes or developers 'outside' power, or indeed offer a 'better' way. Rather, it supports being able to see culture and power relations and provides opportunities for different ways of doing and being, to resist or refuse particular subjectivities or subject positions (and also adopting particular subjectivities or subject positions). This, in turn, requires judgement and as Fendler (2003) argues to maintain a 'sceptical and critical attitude about what we do' and examine learning to avoid it becoming a 'normalising technology that reproduces assumptions' (p. 23). As Downham and Cushion (2020) point out, whether coaches and coach educators accept particular subjectivities or subject positions is, at the end of the day, up to them. However, this research seeks to encourage not only a consideration of prevailing coach learning discourses, but also what these and their subsequent practice *do* to coaches and relations of power (Foucault, 1965). Coach developers cannot be, what Rolfe and Gardner (2006, p. 595) describe as, an 'enlightened guide' if they themselves are not enlightened and able to re-imagine learning for the benefit of coaching.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to consider critically the discursive construction of learning in a high-performance coach development programme. Despite its stated intentions, the programme was a product of, and in-turn, produced discursively based understandings of learning grounded in instrumental rationality. Foucault (1977) stressed that individuals construe themselves in terms of dominant discourses and findings suggest that coach learning was understood in terms of a network of dominant yet intricate discourses. When discourses are accepted as self-evident truths, people participate in their own subjugation (Foucault, 1980). Indeed, analysis highlighted the unintended consequences of the programme's well-intended actions, where the programme promoted self-surveillance and contributed to the construction of coach docility (Foucault, 1977). Importantly, this was the opposite of the programme's intentions of supporting critical thinking, innovation and creativity. Instead, discourse constructed coaches as people who affirmed their identity in terms of

categories reflective of existing assumptions about coach education for high-performance coaching and coaches, such as ‘highly-practical’, ‘learning from other coaches’ and ‘self-regulated learners’. This authenticated and promoted certain ways of thinking about learning and being a coach while potentially dismissing others and possibilities for thinking outside existing categories – coaches were silenced by the dominant discourse.

Similar to other Foucauldian readings and analysis (e.g. Avner et al., 2017; Downham & Cushion, 2020), the concepts presented, in this case for understanding learning, were narrow with limited corresponding potential for change and innovation, despite a range of pedagogical practices employed on the programme. While intending to broaden and improve coach development and learning, the programme failed to challenge or change power relations. Coaching scholars and coach developers should challenge uncritical acceptance and application of ‘taken-for-granted ideas’ about learning, by interrogating dominant knowledges and the problematic disciplinary and normalizing/objectifying effects of coach education practices. Indeed, notions of experiential learning in coaching have retained a ‘seductive appeal’ that, until now, have deflected critical thought.

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