BOOK REVIEW

**Learning in Sports Coaching: Theory and Application,**Edited by Lee Nelson, Ryan Groom, and Paul Potrac, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, 248pp., £105.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-13-881656-5 / £32.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-13-881657-2 / £29.69 (ebk), ISBN 978-1-31-1574601-2

Learning is now well-established as a central feature of sport coaching, with recent scholarly perspectives seeking to better understand the development of knowledge and practical skills across the multiple layers of athlete, coach and coach educator. Nevertheless, practitioners may remain unaware of, or disengaged with, learning frameworks that could guide their practice (Lyle, 2007), and research in these areas has been criticised for a lack of depth and theoretical insight (Cushion et al. 2010). “Learning in Sports Coaching” builds upon burgeoning research attention in this arena, setting out a range of theoretical perspectives and their potential applications to promote the idea of ‘connoisseurship’ (Eisner, 1975) in enhancing learning. In doing so, it acknowledges that all pedagogical practice is underpinned by some often implicit framework of understanding – in other words, theory – highlighting the importance of engaging with theoretical ideas to enhance critical reflection on beliefs about learning, and move beyond mindless reproduction of knowledge and practice (e.g. Piggott, 2012).

“Learning in Sports Coaching” covers the work of seventeen classic and contemporary theorists in separate chapters, which are arranged into six sections; (1) behaviourist and social cognitivist theorists, (2) experiential theorists, (3) humanist theorists, (4) constructivist theorists, (5) critical and post-structuralist theorists, and (6) social and ethical theorists. Similar to much scholarship in sports coaching, the chapters are written by a range of contributors largely from universities in the UK, Canada and Australia, although there are also authors from Brazil and Lithuania. Each chapter provides an introduction to the respective prominent thinker’s life and key concepts of their theorising, followed by applications to the context of sports coaching, including practitioner commentaries on the utility of the theorist’s work and critical questions for readers’ consideration. Framed by an editors’ introduction and concluding thoughts on some similarities, inter-relationships and differences between the theoretical perspectives, the book is designed to be read either in its entirety, from start to finish, or as a way of finding out more about particular theories.

The book begins with a section on the behaviourist work of Burrhus Frederic Skinner and the social cognitivism of Albert Bandura. The former chapter provides a useful delineation of the underpinning philosophies of both methodological and radical behaviourism, as well as the different types of reinforcement and popular misunderstandings and critiques. The latter, meanwhile, addresses the processes of observational learning. Moving on to experiential theorists, section two examines John Dewey and Donald Schön, with particular relevance for coaches undertaking pragmatic inquiry-based learning and reflection. Alongside the key concepts, both chapters make worthwhile mention of wider context in relating Dewey and Schön’s ideas to sport coaching, for instance in considering community and professionalism. Next, humanist theorists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers are introduced, with chapters offering a balanced account of motivational needs and person-centred facilitation of learning respectively. Following explanation of the classic stages of development proposed by Jean Piaget, and the mediated co-operative learning of Lev Vygotsky’s work, section four begins a shift towards second-generation theories. Yrjö Engström’s development of Vygotsky’s ideas to explain the construction of new patterns of activity in collective and cultural contexts is followed by Ivor Goodson’s narrative learning. This chapter emphasises the role of the stories individuals tell in influencing understanding and action, as well as being important sites of learning through exchange and re-construction. The critical and post structural theorists Paulo Friere, Jack Mezirow and Robin Usher are introduced next. The chapter on Friere is particularly useful in outlining attributes of ‘progressive coach educators’ (p. 144), while Mezirow’s phases of transformative learning and Usher’s Foucauldian-inspired issues of social discipline in learning are addressed in the following chapters. Finally, social and ethical theorists Herbert Blumer, Jean Lave, Peter Jarvis and Nel Noddings make up the last section. Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, which explains how humans make meanings and act on objects through social interactions with others, is outlined, while the next chapter coherently explains the philosophy of Lave’s learning as ongoing historically and culturally embodied social praxis, in a direct challenge to dominant individualistic cognitive assumptions. Before the theoretical chapters close with Noddings’ ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’ in moral education to produce better people, the key concepts of Jarvis’ lifelong learning are discussed. Here, a significant point is made about the ability of any one theory to explain learning; namely that each “sheds some light on one or more aspect of learning but ‘None of them have actually explained the whole of the learning processes, and this is the knub [sic] of the matter’ (Jarvis 2006: 197).” (p.206).

Indeed, the concluding chapter attempts to bring together these seventeen distinct theoretical approaches by comparing and contrasting their different aspects along central themes. The book certainly accentuates that the field of learning is incredibly broad with a long history of diverse approaches based on various philosophical underpinnings. It does well to bring together approaches in one place for scholars to digest and consider, however the final chapter also underlines that sports coaching has further to go as a learning field of study and profession. A glance at most introductory coaching textbooks will show learning simply conceptualised along the lines of behaviourist, cognitivist or constructivist ‘camps’. Often, theorists such as Mezirow, Lave and Jarvis may be amalgamated under an all-encompassing ‘constructivist’ label, yet here they are given more nuanced attention with due acknowledgement of their origins and possible applications. Nevertheless, some chapters encourage tangents away from the central concern of learning, for example with the inclusion of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Blumer’s interpretations of social interactions, or even Noddings’ focus on moral *education*. These theorists have been included due to their wider influence on contemporary approaches to psychology, sociology and indeed learning, yet they emphasise just how disparate and even unfocused understandings of learning can be. Consistent with this, the book theorises various perspectives on learning rather than directly addressing learning itself, what it is, how it is defined and explained, and what it looks like in sports coaching. As such, it intends to be and succeeds in serving as a useful prompt for personal reflection, yet it may be tempting for readers to ‘cherry pick’ parts of theories or practice without considering some important factors. The fundamental questions of philosophy, freedom and determinism are largely left to the end while certain chapters do remind readers to consider, for example, Friere’s underpinning moral philosophy and the non-Western origins of his work in applying the theoretical ideas. The editors’ ‘final thoughts’ (p.236) begin to acknowledge a desire for a more coherent and definitive understanding to advance, but in the mean-time, theoretical eclecticism and decisions about which approaches to use are left to the ‘connoisseur’ reader.

Challenges remain in encouraging this idea of ‘theoretical connoisseurship’ amongst practitioners as a way of making their practice more sophisticated and powerful, while guiding readers to understand how they can make the most of the wealth of information on offer. A strength of the book in this regard lies in the practitioner commentaries, which represent a clear attempt to address the typical complaints of students (and coaches) that theory is at best difficult to translate to, and at worst irrelevant to practice. Aiding understanding at the culmination of each chapter, the commentaries are accessible, interesting, and encouraging as they suggest ways that practitioners can and have benefited from considering theoretical concepts in different settings and sports. Some insightful examples include a head coach coming to an appreciation of the difference between evaluating sessions and reflective practice in the chapter on Schön’s experiential theory of reflection, an honest account of the struggles of establishing a new club culture underpinned by Engström’s activity theory, and a coach educator’s critical consideration of Friere’s suggestions for her achievement of successful educational outcomes. The authors should be commended for using this as a vehicle to connect theoretical tenets to practice specifically in the context of sports coaching. Given that it is now accepted that sports coaching, like learning, is a context and situation specific endeavour (Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016; Stodter & Cushion, 2017), it is important to consider how ‘borrowed’ theoretical concepts from other disciplinary spheres might translate. Students and practitioners may need additional support to form links with their own practices however, by means of the subsequent critical questions, reflective discussions, or perhaps smart use of the commentaries as learning activities in their own right. Readers are also left to untangle the different levels of learning that may be taking place, be that for the athlete, coach, coach educator or other.

Overall, this book strengthens a growing appreciation of learning as central to sports coaching and importantly should serve to encourage scholars and students to push past simplistic understandings of learning and deepen their consideration of and reflection on a variety of theoretical perspectives. Students may prefer to use the book to find out about particular theories as directed by their needs, while practitioners may benefit from reading more widely around the commentaries and critical questions. It should act as an impetus to engage more thoroughly in dilemmas, debates and research about learning, with the ultimate aim of developing clarity and unified, situation specific and useful frameworks that explain whole learning processes within sports coaching and coach education.

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