**Reflection and reflective practice: a theoretical and practical guide**

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**Introduction**

The ability to reflect and engage in reflective practice is accepted as a key characteristic of effective and ‘expert’ sport coaches (e.g. Côté & Gilbert, 2009). As sport coaching strives to become a more professionalised, accredited vocation, the role of reflective practice in enabling competent practitioners to function in a dynamic and complex domain has gained added importance (Huntley, Cropley, Gilbourne, Sparkes & Knowles, 2014). A ubiquitous feature of pedagogy, it is often promoted as central to learning and knowledge development in sports coaching and a ‘beacon of hope’ in solution to challenging practice issues (e.g. Carson, 2008). For example, it has been suggested that integration of reflective practice may help to overcome some of the renowned limitations of formal coach education (Hall & Gray, 2016). Despite this, reflection is a disputed concept. There is no one agreed definition to help practitioners pin down what it really is, what is involved and how to do it effectively. Coaching resources and literature borrow from well-established professions such as nursing and education, and interchangeably refer to reflection, self-reflection, reflective thinking, reflective skills, reflective logs or journals and reflective practice, sometimes alongside experiential learning, reviews and evaluations, with the effect of clouding the core meaning and purpose of reflection (Cushion, 2016; Huntley et al., 2014). Moreover, evidence suggests that the skill of reflecting on practice is hugely challenging for coaches, with limited guidance or exemplar education programmes (e.g. Hall & Gray, 2016; Knowles, Borrie & Telfer, 2005; Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie & Nevill, 2001; Nelson & Cushion, 2006). Many coaches will likely be familiar with the experience of being expected to submit reflective portfolios as part of formal accreditation, with ‘no perceptible support’ (Hall & Gray, 2016, p.367), potentially leading to cursory, superficial or even contrived engagement in the process (Burt & Morgan, 2014; Trelfa & Telfer, 2014). Accordingly, this chapter aims to aid coaching practitioners and students in negotiating reflective practice, firstly by examining the practice of a case study UKCC Level 4 qualified coach and coach educator in exhibiting and developing reflection, both for himself and in others. Following this, the concept of reflection will be clarified, drawing upon examples from contemporary research to explain how reflective practice supports coaches’ wider learning. The application of these key theoretical and practical aspects are integrated in the final section to provide evidence-based recommendations for coaching students and practitioners.

Ian Minto has over 30 years of experience as a sports coach and teacher of physical education in secondary and post-16 establishments. In that time he has held the positions of Head of Department, Head of Community Sport, Staff Development Manager, and General Club Manager. Having attained coaching awards in various sports, Ian ultimately concentrated on rugby union and has worked at all levels of the game from under-six through to age group representative squads and national league rugby. He is currently engaged in coaching the women’s squad at Cambridge University RUFC. Ian’s interest in coach development was sparked by attending one of Bunker and Thorpe’s initial presentations regarding ‘teaching for understanding’ in the early 1980’s. Since then, attaining trainer and mentor status with the Rugby Football Union Education Workforce has allowed him to deliver and assess across the various levels of coach education.

**Reflections**

‘Through the mirror of my mind

Time after time

I see reflections of you and me…’

These opening lyrics from the song ‘Reflections’ by Motown group The Supremes are about lost love, but I like to interpret ‘you and me’ as representing the various comparative versions of me in my professional capacity across the four decades I’ve been involved in rugby coaching and teaching physical education. As a practitioner, I consider reflective practice to be a very important tool in the learning that is necessary to examine and transform principles, philosophy, behaviours and conceptual understanding. The following five seminal ‘experiences’ have had (on reflection) the greatest effect on these areas of my work, across my career.

1. **Setting the context - ‘unintended consequences of intended action’**

I’m in primary school aged seven, and nervous about the impending lesson in the outdoor swimming pool. I hate swimming. The task is to go under water whilst holding the bar at the edge, to gain familiarity and confidence. I fail, and despite being shouted at, still don’t do it. The teacher drops a rubber brick next to me and sternly orders me to ‘fetch it’. I don’t move, and she forcibly pushes my head underwater; I struggle, swallow water and resurface, shaking. Sixteen years later, I still haven’t managed to make myself go near a swimming pool. I gain a place at St Luke’s PE College, but need a 25-metre swimming certificate to secure entry - so I enrol in an adult beginner class at a local pool. It involves eight public sessions, and the indignity and embarrassment I feel as a pretty confident and competent sportsman is only bearable due to my motivation to succeed. I eventually do succeed, and on reflection, across the years and in different contexts, I realise the whole episode shaped my teaching and coaching approach. Firstly, it enabled me to work with a great deal of empathy and understanding for those who are either nervous or have low self-confidence in sporting situations. This, as I reflect, is also a cornerstone to my preference for ‘development coaching’ as I refer to it. My ‘role frame’ in this respect influences which experiences I choose to engage in and reflect upon, as well as pedagogical outcomes. For example, I consider various factors that may feed in to a lack of progress by participants, and that these may well be within my control to change, by critically analysing my approach to setting an appropriate climate to maximise learning. Individuals’ needs and knowledge require appraisal, and strategies to overcome resistance to change require careful consideration. My reflection on this is that a range of pedagogical approaches must be adopted. I am thinking here of coaching a skill such as goal kicking from the tee. Reflecting on my experiences of this, I have brought in learning from other sports such as the closed skills of golf. Here, practices involving just kicking from a variety of places (akin to a golf driving range) have been useful with technical feedback, but just being ‘engaged’ has not necessarily led to players’ learning or development, and I have found that challenge and a degree of discomfort is vital. While the learning environment for athletes (as well as coaches) needs to be positive and safe, unlike my early experiences in the pool, I have begun to design practices where the consequences of actions are important, as they are in competition (or on the golf course). Game constraints such as kicking after being involved in running, tackling or heavy contact need to be replicated. I have also pulled the kicker out of a practice game and given them (say) three kicks to succeed with. I’ve recently heard similar principles as striving to be ‘uncomfortably excited’, and my perspective is that this creates pressure for the athlete, with coaching conversations focusing on the courageous and positive aspects of their performance. There are psychological aspects of this approach to simulation during training, and clearly one is to find an optimum performance state for each individual; from a coaching angle this has required a well constructed and effective questioning technique.

1. **A roadmap to develop knowledge-in-action (learning)**

Reflection offers a roadmap to examine experiences and responses as they occur (reflection-in-action), as well as consciously reviewing, describing, analysing and evaluating past practice, with a view to gaining insight to improve future practice (reflection-on-action). There is also a requirement to understand and connect with one’s feelings to release intuition and creativity. As a novice PE teacher and coach I would happily cling to routines and habitual procedures which fulfilled perceived requirements or competencies, but I gradually became aware that to ‘teach someone else’s lesson’ or ‘coach someone else’s session’ was not effective. Early coach education and continuing professional development (CPD) I attended somewhat reinforced this limited approach by offering demonstrations of good practice and to a degree expecting forms of replication. As I gained experience, my reflective discomfort with this led to research, experimentation, higher levels of self-critical analysis and a desire to re-examine practices of my own and others. This has enabled continuous development of personal knowledge-in-action that I can use in specific situations. I am pleased to see that coach education and CPD has now started to embrace this approach too, and consequently on attending such events I now mostly leave with creative and adaptive ideas to try out. Indeed, the championing of ‘reflection’ is itself a major advancement. Obviously after four decades I do have a huge amount of experience to reflect upon, but I have a continuous determination not to become what I call ‘a slave to a drill’ nor to ‘revert to type’.

1. **Using and adapting frameworks: I was schooled in the three R’s, but now I believe in the five R’s**

The saying ‘always be a learner’ summarises my thoughts around developing links between the learning experience and the knowledge construction that follows it. I have found that reflective frameworks can help with this, albeit with some flexibility. For instance, Reading, (w)Riting and (a)Rithmetic were the staples of my school curriculum but as a ‘staff development manager‘ in addition to teaching, and intent on expanding reflective practice, I was and continue to be influenced by the work of Zeichner and Liston (1996). They identified five levels of reflection for teachers, which I adapted for the context of my role as a rugby coach. This process was not linear and involved the production of notes on sessions and experiences both in teaching and coaching. I note in examining these that the reflections gradually increase in complexity and show evidence of an application of the 5R’s below. Notes from CPD sessions attended either as a teacher or rugby coach also show a determination to consider how any knowledge gained might be utilised across situational contexts together with reflections on the actions taken. My additional roles as a mentor and coach educator have also provided much material to stimulate iterative reflection, adaptation and critical analysis. The 5R’s I use are:

* Rapid reflection - immediate, ongoing and automatic action by the teacher/coach.
* Repair – in which a thoughtful teacher/coach makes decisions to alter their behaviour in response to learners’ cues.
* Review – when a teacher/coach thinks about, discusses or writes about some element of their teaching.
* Research – when a teacher/coach engages in more systematic and sustained thinking over time, perhaps by collecting data or reading research. For example, the widespread use of video technology and performance data is one area that can impact greatly on coaching practice and the availability of feedback.
* Retheorizing and reformulating – the process by which a teacher/coach critically examines their own practice, behavior and philosophy in the light of new academic theories or simply through communities of practice.

1. **‘Reflections of you and me’ - supporting reflective conversations**

Mentoring coaches, and specifically encouraging and developing reflective practice, is an aspect of my current work in the wide field of coach and referee education that I really value. A mentor is often categorised as a ‘critical friend’ and in my experience can definitely assist in developing reflective practice by providing adequate support, resources, time, and creating or highlighting opportunities and methods for reflection including the skills of critical analysis and the confidence to utilise it. I have supported reflective practice from all aspects of the process, including designing an action research scheme in a large sixth form college to encourage staff induction and mentoring, and the ‘team/group’ meetings engaged in were valuable in enabling collective reflective conversations. Translating this to coaching, I have found the shared reflective process to significantly assist progress. Reflections are clearly internal processes to contemplate and develop cognitive structures leading to actions, but I have found the verbalising of these with another to be most valuable. The process falls on a continuum between formal and informal, with the aim of making sense of experiences and thus transforming coaching knowledge-in-action and behaviour. It is also applicable to the development of technical and tactical aspects of the coaching craft. However, I have learned that in order for this to occur, a crucial quality for critical friends or mentors is that of effective questioning and active listening. Key elements are the type, style, timing and frequency of questions, together with the ability to listen and give full attention to the answers received (e.g. Mitchell, 2014; UK Coaching, 2018). Clearly, questioning can be adapted for a variety of contexts, from challenging thinking through triggering self-awareness to developing self-expression. To paraphrase Kline (1999), most people aren’t listening…they are preparing to speak; so listening too needs to be authentic in context, non-judgemental and practiced. For example, one question I use and reflect upon in my context is ‘are there players in your squad you have not listened to?’

1. **Problematising reflective practice…where next?**

My final thoughts on development as a reflective practitioner stem from studying an MSc in Sports Sociology. Reflective practice is interest-serving and it is important to consider what (and whose) interests might be served through the process (Ghaye, 2011). I therefore remain interested to investigate conceivable concerns about ‘reflection’ and its potential intended and unintended effects both on my players and myself. These can cover the realms of pedagogical, professional, conceptual and ethical issues. One example is the way that individual coach’s self-awareness, knowledge and beliefs can limit their reflections, carrying the danger of perpetually reproducing practices and stifling innovation and progress (e.g. Hall & Gray, 2016). Critical reflection (retheorizing and reformulating) is important in this regard. To extend this, it is worthwhile exploring how learning through reflective practice transfers into the development of a reflective practitioner. I have found that sports coaching is a work environment in which there can be a connection between learning (through reflection) and a conscious effort to apply such, but there remain many contextual and social constraints. As an example I have found that challenging emotional judgments and helping myself to stay in the moment are difficult behaviours to manage to improve my coaching. The reflection-in-action process does need to be learned and adapted to ensure effectiveness. I am pleased with progress in this but consider that although reflective practice can be a cognitive and a written process, there are clearly issues in recognising or indeed measuring the effects of reflective practice. The key aspects of reflective practice for sport coaches that are illustrated in this reflective account will now be identified and explained in more theoretical detail, with links to the implications for coaches’ wider learning.

***Definitions of reflection***

As alluded to above, the terms reflection and reflective practice generically refer to internal cognitive processes that act as a bridge between experience and learning (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Although both reflection and practice are contested concepts, it is generally accepted that they are linked, as through reflection (often described as structured or organised thinking), we can develop new insights and understandings that help us to improve our actions (doing) (Ghaye, 2011). Theorising in the area draws significant influence from the work of educational pragmatist John Dewey (1910), who proposed that learning from experience occurs through a process of reflective thinking or inquiry; and later Donald Schön (1983, 1987), who introduced key ideas such as the temporal aspects of reflection-*in*-action (i.e. thinking while doing) and reflection-*on*-action (i.e. thinking after the event). Reflective practice is popularly promoted as a way of enhancing learning, knowledge and effective functioning in sports coaching, based on several years of research and practice in established professions where practitioners rely on experiential decision making and judgement such as nursing, education and management (Knowles, Gilbourne, Cropley, & Dugdill, 2014). Given these broad foundations from different domains, generating varying and at times contradictory interpretations, a number of myths and misunderstandings resonate around the concept of reflective practice. For instance, there is a tendency to see it as simply a matter of pausing for thought, conducting superficial reviews or ‘navel gazing’, yet reflective practice should go much further than these literal common sense interpretations of loosely defined ‘thinking about practice’ (Ghaye, 2011; Thompson & Thompson, 2008). Although an empirically based and operationalised sport coaching-specific definition remains elusive, the following definition may be a useful starting point. Bringing together key characteristics commonly reported in definitions relevant to professionals working in sport and exercise, Knowles et al (2014) proposed that reflective practice is:

‘A purposeful and complex process that facilitates the examination of experience by questioning the whole self and our agency within the context of practice. This examination transforms experience into learning, which helps us to access, make sense of and develop our knowledge-in-action in order to better understand and/or improve practice and the situation in which it occurs’ (p.10).

***Reflective practice and knowledge-in-action***

Reflection is conceptualised as part of a learning process, and it appears at the heart of all experience-based learning theories (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). A common thread among different theories is that reflective practice enables learning and knowledge construction embedded in the particular activity and context (i.e. knowledge-in-action). This is important for sports coaches because as Cropley, Miles and Nichols (2016, p. 13) put it, ‘the map is not the territory’. In other words, theoretical, professional, technical-rational knowledge about things (the map) does not always match up neatly with the path required to negotiate the dynamic, ambiguous, situation specific and socially derived practice issues that coaches encounter day-to-day (the territory). While the former, often found at the forefront of formal coach education programmes, provides clarity and a rational route ‘from A to B’ based on decontextualized knowledge, the latter requires that practitioners transform their experiences to develop tacit, situated knowledge that ‘works’ in context, bridging the gap between theory and practice (Cropley et al., 2016). Therefore reflective practice can generate understanding that enables coaches to implement relevant strategies directly resonating with their personal practical needs in context. However, we cannot assume that such construction of coaches’ knowledge ‘just happens’ (Knowles et al., 2001). For meaningful learning to take place, practitioners must actively engage in reflection that results in the excavation of knowledge embedded within the experience (Cropley et al, 2016). Indeed, it has been suggested that there are different levels or ‘depths’ of reflection, and investment in *critical reflection*, which questions and problematizes social, political, moral and ethical meanings is required in order to effectively learn and change practices (Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2016; Hall & Gray, 2016; Knowles et al., 2005). As mentioned in the opening reflective account, it seems that some level of challenge and discomfort is needed for this to occur.

***Reflective practice and learning***

Despite the supposed benefits, there is limited direct real-world evidence linking reflective practice with effectiveness in coach learning or practice (Hall & Gray, 2016; Lyle & Cushion, 2017). In the field of sports coaching, similar to wider coach learning, reflection has tended to be dominated by uncritically recycled definitions and simplified ‘step-by-step’ models or prescriptions *for* practice from other domains (e.g. ‘Plan-Do-Review’; Crisfield, 2009). Yet coaching and learning to coach is increasingly understood as a complex and situation specific endeavour that consequently would benefit from context-specific and evidence-based frameworks to more appropriately guide practice (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Two relevant models *of* coaches’ learning provide insights into the role and process of reflection, grounded in empirical evidence from youth sport coaches (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Both frameworks support Schön’s (1983) ideas in demonstrating the way that coaches learn from experiences through cyclical ‘reflective conversations’, which consist of continuous adaptation of coaching strategies, experimentation and evaluation, all framed by personal biography, values or approaches to coaching. In this research, coaches were seen to ‘try out’ different coaching strategies or ‘bits’ of knowledge (i.e. knowledge concepts, perhaps encountered through formal education), which become conceptions as they are applied to a particular context meaningful to the practitioner, their meanings becoming embedded in experiences of using it (c.f. knowledge-in-action). Coaches then made judgements of ‘what works’ in practice, and adopted, rejected, or adapted and experimented with refined strategies in a continuous reflective feedback loop (Stodter & Cushion, 2017).

Evidence suggests the importance of coaches’ personal openness and contextual factors to the ‘quality’ of this often tacit or intuitive reflective practice process. Individual subscription to ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of coaching, and more absolute ideas about knowledge tend to go hand-in-hand with learning as simple reproduction of accepted norms. As people begin to recognise knowledge as provisional and relative, evidence is used to reason among alternatives (Entwistle and Peterson 2004). This means, in other words, experimenting with and critically evaluating new ideas in practice based on ‘what works’. Moreover, since coaches may be held accountable for maximising performance success and winning, it is understandable that they can be “reluctant to take risks or depart too far from the status quo of accepted practice” (Light and Robert 2010, p. 113). As alluded to in the fifth point of the reflective account, coaches’ reflective cycles of learning are bound up with practice that often takes place in contexts subject to power relationships, intense emotions and anti-intellectual beliefs (Potrac, Smith & Nelson, 2017). Consequently, while learning situated in everyday practice is essential, coaching environments are not always conducive to generating new ideas, supporting active experimentation, or facilitating transfer from knowledge to implementation (Stodter & Cushion, 2016). Additionally, coaching and reflecting on coaching can be an emotional practice, and access to respected, trusted and skilled peers has been found to be critical in facilitating the reflective process (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001).

**Recommendations**

Despite some enduring concerns about adopting a ‘simple process’ of reflective practice without question, initial evidence from the sport and exercise literature does suggest that it is a highly skilled activity which can be developed over time, with benefits for coaching practitioners (Knowles et al., 2001; 2014). Based on the preceding discussion of literature and experiences from the field of sports coaching, we offer the following recommendations which, like reflective practice itself, sit at the interface between theory and practice:

* Understanding personal biography and role frame is a valuable starting point, as this guides and influences what issues are seen as meaningful and worth reflecting on, as well as how they are interpreted (Stodter & Cushion, 2016).
* Reflective practice needs to be embedded in authentic coaching practice (Cropley et al., 2016; Stodter & Cushion, 2016). Ideally, this can be enhanced with the development of contexts open to experimentation, as reflection is most likely to be found where there is ‘a high priority on flexible procedures, differentiated responses, qualitative appreciation of complex processes, and decentralised responsibility for judgement and action’ (Schön 1983, p.338).
* Frameworks can help guide reflective practice, for example in providing a structure to examine reflective feedback loop processes of generating strategies, experimenting or ‘trying out’, evaluation, and adaptation and/or rejection (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Nevertheless, models have their limitations and adaptations for individuals’ own needs and contexts (through reflective practice!) may be most effective.
* ‘Making sense’ of experiences is a key stage in most frameworks, which suggests that mere description is not effective as a means of learning. Reflection should be specific and where possible include a critical interpretation of actions (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Central to the critical process is a need to question what coaches do and why (Knowles et al., 2001). This can allow coaches to make judgements that are meaningful within particular situations and challenge, rather than reinforce accepted beliefs and practices (Partington, Cushion, Cope & Harvey, 2015).
* Evidence consistently demonstrates that video-based feedback is a tool which provides powerful stimulation to recall events and potential for deep learning in coaching. With constant improvements in readily available portable technology, video can flexibly facilitate examination of ‘what really works’ and illuminate tacit cognitive processes, vital for the implementation of knowledge-in-action (Carson, 2008; Partington et al., 2015; Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Trudel, Gilbert & Tochon, 2001).
* There are limits to learning alone. Reflection appears to be useful in combination with mentoring, for instance in facilitating open ‘reflective conversations’ on how to apply learning to specific contexts. The shared reflection process does depend on a shared vocabulary and underpinning understanding of the coaching process (Lyle & Cushion, 2017).
* Effective involvement of others through reflective conversations relies on questioning (which directs growth) and listening, alongside discussions around professional values. Ghaye (2011) provides several useful ideas and examples around positive reflective conversations from the educational domain.
* Reflection is one part of a wider learning process, and therefore practitioners should aim to make it a continuous, integrated activity (Lyle & Cushion, 2017).

Importantly, more direct evidence is needed to further our understanding of the impact of reflection *in* and *on* practice in coaching, in order to advance this taken-for-granted process and maximise effectiveness (Hall & Grey, 2016; Huntley et al., 2014; Lyle & Cushion, 2017). A principle challenge continues to be ensuring that individual coaches are supported to ‘get’ reflection and use it as intellectually curious professionals (Trelfa & Telfer, 2014).

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