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Back to the Future: Rethinking Coach Learning and Development in the UK

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Abstract

A shift from coach ‘education’ to coach ‘learning and development’ is currently taking place in the UK. This article will examine some of the reasons for that shift by exploring the principles and attempted introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) into coaching during the 1990s. The introduction of NVQs represented a significant change but did not necessarily deliver the desired outcomes. Rethinking coach learning and development is then described with reference to current developments. The article makes recommendations by outlining a learning and assessment framework that is flexible, learner-led, and captures the current momentum for change.

Key words: education, learning, assessment, qualifications, coach development.

Introduction

Learning is a complex, personal and continuous process. It can be hard work, and often involves making connections between different types of learning and interpreting existing ideas and beliefs from an alternative perspective. Developing an effective coach learning and development system to support this process is equally challenging. This article explores the history of the coach learning and development system in the UK and presents a potential model of learning and assessment that could inform the development of a more flexible and agile system.

The aims of Coaching in an Active Nation: the Coaching Plan for England (Sport England, 2016), the introduction of professional standards for coaches, the outcomes of the review of the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC), and a new definition of coaching, signify a paradigmatic shift. There is a move from coach education, which is highly regulated and qualification-led, to coach learning and development, which is more adaptable and learner-centred. This article will review past developments and explore current and future opportunities. It will provide recommendations for those working in the system based on the learning and assessment model proposed.

How did we arrive at the current system?

Since the mid-1990s, the awarding of a coaching qualification has been constructed around a linear, four-level structure aligned to the UK national qualification framework. At levels 1 to 3, this approach is primarily:

1) Designed around the assessment of functional competencies drawn from the national occupational standards for coaching (NOS).
2) Owned and delivered by training providers – predominantly national governing bodies of sport (NGBs).
3) Quality assured by approved awarding bodies.
4) Endorsed (from 2002 onwards) through the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC).

This approach, and the system through which coaches progress, has attracted much criticism. The system is dominated by regulated coaching qualifications which, research suggests, have limited impact on coach behaviour or practice (Nelson et al, 2013, Piggott, 2012). It also seems to be failing the development of female and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) coaches (Norman, 2008; Norman et al, 2018) and ignores the informal learning that coaches seem to substantially benefit from. To better understand this system it helps to understand how it came about.

In 1986, a White Paper, Working Together: Education and Training, laid the foundations for a new system of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) that would fundamentally reform vocational education and training (VET) in the UK. The following principles informed the design and implementation of NVQs (Jessup, 1991):

1) Designed around functional competencies
2) Indicative of the assumption that functional competencies are external to the individual and can be objectively discovered, defined and measured (Hodkinson, 1994).
3) Written in complex, jargon-laden and ambiguous language that prohibits a clear understanding of them (Raggatt and Williams, 1999).
4) Practically constrained by the challenge of implementing individualised learning and the absence of a curriculum that structures the learning process (Smithers, 1993).
5) Subject to concerns regarding the validity and reliability of assessment when this is undertaken in the workplace by line managers and supervisors (Wolff, 1995).

Through continuous debate, a lack of consensus, and the necessity of cost-effective delivery and administration, VET and NVQs have been subject to constant change (Raffe, 2015). In coach education, the introduction of NVQs were viewed as a way to restructure the existing approach to coach education.

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coaching is very different to other vocational and professional sectors in the UK labour market. It is argued that the introduction of VET and NVQs in the UK in the 1990’s, led to the development of a coach education system that was a ‘middle track compromise’ between a traditional course of education with aspects of the NVQ model. The system was overtly qualification-led and represented an often generic approach that failed to appropriately accommodate the individual learning needs of coaches. A vital ingredient given the highly differentiated nature of the coaching workforce.

The current landscape and developments

Sport England’s Coaching in an Active Nation (2016) seeks to address some of these challenges. Alongside a broader definition of coaching, and a greater focus on supporting a more active population, the plan seeks to:

• ‘modernise [coach development] approaches and make it easier for more people from a wider range of backgrounds to join the coaching community’.
• ‘foster an improvement culture ... where coaches are actively engaged in improving their ability to deliver and develop a lifelong learning habit’;
• ‘utilise technology to improve ... and build an ‘on demand’ learning and development capability for coaches’.

This is a vision shared by UK Coaching in Transforming Learning, Transforming Lives (UK Coaching, 2018) which seeks to create a system that promotes lifelong learning, empowers coaches to take ownership of their own development, recognises different types of learning, advocates learning through peer relationships, and embraces new forms of technology. Built on a model of connectivity, the aspiration is to develop more reflective, confident coaches who can deliver high quality experiences to the people they coach.

The challenge for NGBs is how to respond to these initiatives and how to represent a more person-centred approach to coach learning and development. Some NGBs are already developing an NVQ system:

Great Britain and England Hockey

Great Britain and England Hockey’s rationale is to provide engaging support and development to the people that deliver hockey, based on their role: “The previous qualification terminology suggested a hierarchical nature to the development of coaches and did not cater for the differing groups or capabilities that a coach delivers to.”

This represents moving away from a system that develops qualified coaches, to a system that develops appropriately skilled coaches. “The renaming of qualifications (eg Introduction to Hockey Coaching, Sessional Coach Course) and the introduction of a far wider coach development pathway involving many more specific development opportunities will better equip coaches with what is needed to deliver in certain environments.”

Through consultation they also learnt “that courses need to have maximum ‘pitch time’ and more home study time to allow for coaches to learn in their own time.”

It is claimed this has reduced the length of courses and the amount of travel to and from courses. They also “built in flexible assessment methods so the coach will be supported through to completion of the qualification after attending the course.” (England Hockey, 2019)

Badminton England

Badminton England has sought to recognise and provide a broader range of learning opportunities beyond the normal coach education courses. Such courses alone ‘will only provide coaches with a base level of skills and knowledge, so a wider structure is essential to support the wide range of coaches’ (Badminton England, 2019).

They are developing a suite of opportunities aimed at all levels and types of coaches, consisting of practical workshops, e-learning modules and informal learning.

Their vision is that coaches can choose to engage with workshops and modules that support and complement the type of coaching that they are involved in. It aims to enable coaches to plot a personalised learning journey shown on a learner’s ‘tube map’. As these two examples illustrate, a more flexible and personal approach shifts the focus of learning from content to context. It also provides more autonomy for coaches to be responsible for their own learning and can help to meet the needs of more coaches more often. It is a paradox that this approach is identical to the core principles of the NVQ system.

“Learning is an individual experience and to ‘standarise’ it by adopting specific modes and time periods is not the most effective means for a group to achieve a set of learning outcomes. Individuals need to manage their own learning experiences in a manner which recognises where they start from, their preferred modes of learning, and the time and opportunities they have for learning” (Jessup, 1995).
Jessup (1991) also argued that learning takes many forms which range from the formal to the informal, and only the learner can make coherent sense of what they have learnt from these different experiences. He also proposed that learners should be assessed by way of accumulating evidence from across all their learning experiences and the various opportunities they have engaged with. Jessup (1990) also suggested that assessment should be “more friendly and facilitate learning rather than acting as a deterrent or just an obstacle to be overcome.” A process that he envisaged would require new, more imaginative and alternative forms of assessment.

The approaches that are now being promoted and adopted are not new. They have been evident within the underlying educational philosophy of vocational education and training since the early 1990s. Where the NVQ system arguably failed, particularly in coaching, was overlaying the philosophical approach with a rigid, linear system that incorporated the assessment of very prescriptive functional competencies, which do not always reflect the complex judgements and decisions coaches make in practice (Collins et al, 2015). The educational principles were sound enough, but they were distorted during implementation and the design of the system around them.

In summary, the current landscape appears to be one in which a transformative shift from coach education towards coach learning and development is being recognised. The challenge is how a system change can be achieved across the 150+ recognised sports without fragmented approaches, different ideas and inconsistent practices emerging. There is arguably a need for system developers to be able to refer to a common coach learning and development framework that is flexible, offers the scope for innovation, and captures the progressive spirit that is now gathering momentum. The model explained below may contribute to a debate about what a future framework might look like.

Rethinking coach learning and development in the UK

A way to provide some insight into a possible framework is to look at the largest scale learning and assessment system in most countries: the driving test.

The UK driving test is a literal illustration of an accessible, flexible and robust approach to learning and assessment (see ‘Becoming a licensed driver’ box). It is the accomplished and personal choice of how individuals construct their learning for the final two assessments (theory and practical) that is of interest here.

Becoming a licensed driver

A learner driver can be taught by a driving instructor, a friend or self-taught through work experience (with a qualified driver accompanying). They then organise a test and demonstrate to a driving examiner, who is independent of their learning, that they can perform to the required standard. It may take 10 or 100s of hours of driving experience and learning and/or being examined multiple times: the learning is implied and assumed by the capability to perform in real conditions and meeting the required standard. There is no prescribed ‘course’ that a learner must attend. Successful drivers draw on all their learning experiences. In most cases their learning includes input from a qualified driving instructor alongside the experience they have gained with those accompanying them. An online theory test is taken separately to the practical driving test.

The approach to becoming a licensed driver is an example of an ‘outcomes’ based approach to learning and assessment because it is the outcome of learning that matters not necessarily the learning itself. Learning and assessment are consequently separated and distinct from each other, with the learning component being specific to the individual and constructed through drawing on different forms of learning. How an individual learns to drive is not the primary focus of the process, what matters is that they learn to drive safely, they are able to demonstrate this in real conditions and satisfy an assessor that they are not a danger to themselves and other road users.

5) The outcomes and mode of summative assessment should be transparent, robust and quality assured and consistent across sports.

Figure 1 depicts the progression of a coach from one level or stage to another. In this sense there is still a commitment to a ‘staged system’ with summative assessment ‘gateways’ except that the process through which a coach moves from one stage to another is very different to the current system. These stages are not necessarily numbered, but each stage could represent the different roles and contexts that coaches work within and named accordingly.

The model in figure 1 has five main elements:

1. Initial compulsory registration and guidance

Coaches at each stage are informed and understand the process that lies ahead and how they progress towards the ‘gateway’ summative assessment. This is the start of the journey within each stage and an initial form of action planning may take place here and, if possible, some one-to-one guidance is provided.

2. Learning is separated from summative assessment

The summative assessment process (the gateway) is still owned by NGs and a future UKCC endorsement process or similar might endorse this process to ensure consistency and quality assurance across and within sports. An assessment should enable coaches to demonstrate what they have learnt and how this has impacted their practice and the experience of the people they coach rather than repeating or remembering what they have been taught on a course. A focus on safe practice would be maintained and the CIMSPA professional standards would underpin the skills, knowledge and behaviours being assessed.
3. A clearly identified compulsory ‘core’ learning
   This would focus on the essential aspects of coaching. Again, the NGB could decide what core learning is and how it is delivered. The example of hockey reducing content and time is perhaps an instructive example that careful thought needs to be given to what, and how much time, this core learning takes.

4. Coaches curate their own additional learning
   An individual would decide, just like the learner driver scenario, what best supports their progress towards summative assessment and is specific to their needs. For example, support from a mentor, attending workshops, online learning, short courses or learning provided by their employer or another organisation (e.g. club, school, college or university). Appropriate guidance and advice would be provided as to what is ‘recommended learning’ (i.e. opportunities that a coach is strongly advised to follow) and ‘optional learning’ (i.e. useful for specific coaching contexts). It is the learner’s responsibility to keep track and collect evidence of completion of their additional learning, not the NGB. This might be done through digital badges, a reflective journal or e-portfolio submission as part of the summative assessment.

5. A coach decides when they are ready to be assessed
   The summative assessment process only takes place when a coach feels ready. Some coaches may be ready almost as they register, for others the process may take a lot longer.

This model of learning and assessment described still incorporates the underlying aspects of vocational education and training in the UK: no new concepts or theories are being introduced. However, there are some implementation challenges:

- Supporting coaches to learn and become qualified is an income stream for many organisations so changing the approach could be more challenging.
- Some organisations have limited resources to restructure their provision and may need to be incentivised to collaborate and share common coaching related modules or online resources.
- Deciding what is core and how much time is devoted to this.
- Reallocation of resources from content delivery to coach developer and mentor support.
- Deciding if coaching qualifications should remain on the national qualification framework (currently the Recognised Qualifications Framework – RQF) and accepting the constraints on design and delivery this entails.
- Delivery at scale across the UK given the challenges associated with devolved administrations in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Change, particularly substantial change is never easy or straightforward. Nevertheless, there is a sense that change is now needed, but with this change comes risk. As this article has described, the proposed introduction of NVQs during the 1990s represented another significant moment of change in the coaching landscape that did not deliver the intended strategic outcomes. In this article we have sought to present a future framework that is designed on an outcomes model of learning and assessment. Coach education in the UK has been criticised due to variability, lack of coherence, and inconsistencies in practice Coaching Matters (1991) and the Coaching Task Force Report (2002). Such criticisms also seem evident in the more recent review of the UKCC endorsement process, where it was perceived as being either too prescriptive or lacked standardisation, and featured too much variation across and within sports (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2018). Some type of common framework would therefore seem beneficial to underpin the development of a new coach learning and development system.

Conclusions
   Rethinking a coach learning and development system that embraces a more diverse workforce, ensures that nobody is excluded from developing their potential, and helps coaches to develop their practice so they can enhance the experience of the people they coach, will not be easy. It requires imaginative thinking, a willingness to change, recognising and embracing different ways of learning, and collaboration. It also requires learning from the past and re-evaluating the lessons learnt.

In this article we have sought to contribute to this process. Building a system requires frameworks and models that can act as a point of reference, a thinking tool or a conversation prompts. Any framework must also be realistic and aligned to the strategic outcomes of a policy. The model of learning and assessment proposed in this article is intended to stimulate debate about how a coach learning and development system might evolve. Its aim is to continue the conversation already started, to generate reflection and encourage even more creative ways of thinking.

References


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