

Professional Learning: Developing a Community of Practice

Lynn Kidman, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

Dawn Penney, University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Abstract

This paper directs attention to coaches' professional learning. It arises from a three- year project in Aotearoa New Zealand that has evaluated a professional development programme designed to enhance and accelerate high performance coaches' learning; the Coach Accelerator Programme (CAP). Drawing on data from interviews with coaches, the programme manager and support staff, and participant observations, we report on the ways in which coaches' learning has been facilitated and supported. The concept of Community of Practice provides the theoretical framework for discussion of the programme and findings. Findings relating to two sub-themes (i) the dominant culture of the community, characterised as a culture of learning and sharing; and (ii) the structure, opportunity and support for the culture and community; are presented. Achievements to date and significant challenges that need to be acknowledged in ongoing development of the CAP are addressed.

Key Words: Coaching; Community of Practice; Professional Learning; Learning Networks; Culture.

Introduction

In recent years a growing body of research and literature has sought to enhance understandings of coaching from pedagogical perspectives. This work is characterised by a focus on learning and learning relationships and is reflected in several texts that are now well established in the field (see for example Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2009; Jones, 2006; Kidman & Hanrahan, 2010). Amidst this development, a significant number of studies have directed attention to coaches' learning (see Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Culver & Trudel, 2006; Cusion, Armour & Jones, 2003; Gilbert & Trudel, 2006; Jones, Potrac & Armour, 2004; Mallett, Trudel, Lyle & Rynne, 2009; Werthner & Trudel, 2006) and more particularly, high performance coach learning (Mallett, Rossi & Tinning, 2008; Occhino, Mallett & Rynne, 2013). This paper seeks to prompt further discussions about coaches' learning and particularly, the structures and relations that may best

facilitate and support coaches' learning. It is underpinned by the belief that coaches' openness to learning is fundamental to an athlete-centred approach to coaching.

The paper draws on data arising from empirical research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand, centering on a national professional development programme, the Coach Accelerator Programme (CAP). As we discuss below, the programme seeks to enhance and accelerate coaches' learning and stands out as having a long-term, ongoing development orientation. The project reported here represents a response to calls for research that supports ongoing context-relevant learning of coaches (Cassidy, Potrac, & McKenzie, 2006) and was designed to actively inform the ongoing development of the CAP. In this paper we draw on interview and participant observation data to address a major theme that has emerged from analysis; the notion of coaches as learners within a Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991, see below). Two sub-themes provide the focus for reporting and discussion of data; (i) the dominant culture of the community, characterised as a culture of learning and sharing; and (ii) the structure and support for the culture and community. In addressing both sub-themes, we reveal key factors contributing to the development and maintenance of a positive culture and community of learners and notable tensions and challenges inherent in efforts to achieve this through the CAP. The discussion of literature that follows reflects the theoretical perspectives underpinning our analysis of the CAP. This provides the backdrop to the research design and presentation of data.

Communities of Practice and coaches' learning

Community of Practice (CoP) is a concept presented by Lave and Wenger (1991) to engage with learning as a social phenomenon and bring to the fore the notion of a group of people coming together for mutual learning in and through processes of negotiation of meanings. It is a concept thus underpinned by a social constructivist understanding of learning. Learning and the community itself centres on a "process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). For there to be a CoP, there must be a sustained mutual engagement of phenomena and interactions within the community (Culver, et al., 2009). Wenger (1998, p.4) explains CoP as constituting: "Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an ongoing basis". The concerns, problems and meanings that effectively

distinguish the community are contextual and learning within the community is characterised by negotiation as individual members relate personal contexts to the collective. Learning within the community is thus inherently social and reliant upon social participation (Culver & Trudel, 2008) and social relations.

From a coaching perspective this orientation aligns with the view of learning that is central to an athlete centred approach to coaching. From a coach development perspective, the concept of a CoP is consistent with a shift from thinking of professional learning in terms of 'fixed knowledge' to be delivered and learned, to an emphasis on professional development as necessarily ongoing and situated, which has been repeatedly called for in coaching literature (see Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Cushion, et al., 2006; Cushion, 2011a; Penney, 2008). It also acknowledges the significance of individual meaning amidst learning (Light & Dixon, 2007) while simultaneously capturing the learning potential inherent in the community as a collective. Within a CoP the relations and learning culture is dependent on meanings related to the members of the community (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Unwin, 2005) and the learning of all individuals will be facilitated, supported and/or limited by the relations and culture.

Notably, the concept of CoP also embraces the significance of both formal and informal dimensions of learning (and learning relations). Mallett, et al (2009) define learning within formal (formal education, institutions, programmes), nonformal (institutions, educational programmes) and informal contexts. Their work points to the particular significance of informal activities and experiences for coaches' learning. A growing number of research studies reaffirm this emphasis, reporting that coaches identify informal networks as presenting powerful learning opportunities (Culver, et al., 2009; Mallett, et al., 2008; Occhino, et al., 2013; Rynne, et al., 2008). In the context of Australian Rules Football (AFL) Mallett, et al (2008) highlighted that coaches' learning related to a complex web of sources, and that the networks associated with coaches' learning included relationships with players, officials, administrators and support staff. In Occhino, Mallett and Rynne's (2013) study, AFL coaches determined that their greatest learning opportunities came from individuals who the AFL coaches deemed 'coaches of influence'. As Allee (2000) suggests, such learnings are unstructured, sporadic and depend on relationships of need, such that the learning network is inherently both social and dynamic. Light and Dixon (2007, p.162) reiterate that learning "is socially and culturally situated and a dynamic part of our lives". With research affirming these as critical characteristics of coaches' learning, programmes seeking to advance and support coaches' professional learning are

challenged to actively nurture learning opportunities and relations that build upon and develop the social learning capacity inherent in professional networks. In this regard, drawing from Wenger (1998), Mallet (2010) considered both the prospective merits and limitations of the concept of CoP, particularly in relation to high performance coaching contexts. As Mallet (2010) explains, three features characterise the nature of learning and learning relations that define a CoP as such; “a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and a shared repertoire” (p.128). A joint enterprise centres on “a shared common purpose or goal participation in the community”, arising from “a collective process of situated negotiation” (ibid.,p. 128). In essence, it is “concerned with what community is about” (ibid., p.128). Mutual engagement reflects Wenger’s (1998) emphasis that practice resides in the community and its social relations; there is collective engagement in the community’s work and this action is negotiated. The third feature, a shared repertoire is associated with the production of “resources and artifacts (e.g. routines, tools, vocabulary) that belong to the community and that identify members of that community” (ibid., p.129, emphasis added). Collectively, the three features reflect the relative autonomy of a CoP and highlight that self regulation serves to define and maintain boundaries to/of the community and hierarchies within it.

Mallet (2010) has acknowledged that some well recognised characteristics of high performance coaching environments do not necessarily align well with the suggested utility of the concept of CoP in coaching contexts. These characteristics include that high performance coaching environments may in many instances be “highly contested with power dynamics and fights for survival” (p.130) and provide “differential access to a community’s knowledge and resources” (p.130, emphasis added). As Rynne and Mallet (2006) have recognised, communities of coaches may well have considerable knowledge within/amongst their members, but they do not always support collaborative endeavours. Observations such as these point to a need for further research that critically engages with the concept of CoP, and that specifically explores factors that act to facilitate or in contrast inhibit functionality of high performance coaching communities from a professional learning stand point.

Other research provides further insights into some of the complexities of collaborative learning amongst coaches. Cassidy and Rossi (2006) explored the importance of a ‘newcomer and old timer’ relationship for mentoring within a coaching community. Cushion (2006) has further suggested that a CoP is especially significant in that both the mentor and the mentee can contribute to a community of learning. Such a learning relationship can be situated within a

community's social and cultural context. Thus mentors are not viewed as "working on but rather with the world of practice (Cushion & Denstone, 2011, p. 97) and therefore engaged in the learning process. Cushion and Denstone (2011, p. 97) suggest that such "horizontal interaction" and relationships can enable transparency of practices within (and defining) the community.

Mutual trust and shared values have repeatedly been identified as critical to relationships that facilitate coach learning and development. Mallett, Rossi and Tinning (2008) highlighted that the development of trust takes years to build and furthermore, that the length of this process can hinder coach development structures. The observation that coaches sought information from trusted sources, i.e. those who the individual coach felt they could trust (Mallett et al., 2008) points to the importance of endeavours to actively foster trust within organisations, networks and communities, but also, the 'agentic' role of coaches in developing their own networks (Occhino, et al., 2013) and thus, avenues for learning. As Culver and Trudel (2008) emphasise; people will work well with people they already know and work with and the development of trust is key to enabling coaches to share information, knowledge, insights or ideas but it is the individuals who ultimately will instigate particular exchanges and not others. In this sense, the notion of Dynamic Social Network (DSN) and particularly the understanding that in the light of changes in trust and respect, relations and membership of networks will all evolve over time (Occhino, et al., 2013) is pertinent to the exploration of CoP in coaching. In addition, we suggest that the concept of culture that has featured prominently in much coaching literature (and research concerned with teams in particular) has potentially important application amidst efforts to extend understandings of CoP in coaching. Notably, while 'culture' is frequently embedded in commentaries associated with CoP, clarity about its meaning in this context is far more difficult to ascertain. Occhnio et al (2013) draw upon Wenger (1998), to foreground shared repertoire comprising "routines, gestures, words and actions" (p. 92). Sánchez and Alonso's (2003, cited in Sánchez & Yurrebaso, 2009, p.98) commentary on culture brings to the fore "suppositions, values and norms whose meanings are collectively shared in a particular social unit (work team or group) at a specific time", while Jones (2010) draws attention to reciprocal influence as a defining dimension of interactions associated with cultures in sport. Both of these emphases are echoed in research that has focused on team culture, with development of such a culture identified as involving individuals working together for mutual benefit (Carron, Habermas & Eys, 2005; Jones, 2010; Yukelson, 1997). Research has also highlighted that active leadership and facilitation has a critical role to play in the creation and maintenance of positive team culture. Thus, we echo Culver and

Trudel (2008) in suggesting the importance of having a competent facilitator and a certain amount of structure to act as a scaffold for learning within the community. In the discussion that follows we associate these needs with the active development of culture within the community.

Research design and methodology

This research project was designed as an evaluation study to investigate the effects of the CAP on the pedagogical skills, knowledge and understandings of coaches involved in the programme, and to gain insights into the impact in relation to their athletes' learning. As a three year project the research sought to go beyond a 'snap shot' perspective and generate in-depth data that pursued the ongoing effect of the CAP in relation to how coaches engaged with and used established and new pedagogical knowledge, understandings and approaches over time. The research design reflected a commitment to findings informing the ongoing development of the CAP, with regular communication and ongoing negotiation between the researchers, CAP manager and Sport New Zealand (Sport NZ) research management staff, an important feature of the project.

To address the above intentions, the research adopted a qualitative framework and drew upon case study research and ethnography. The project has utilised multiple methods and elements of data collection that are detailed below. An over-riding emphasis for all data collection has been to ensure the voluntary nature of participation in the research and to avoid perceptions of an expectation to participate and/or any sense that the research/researchers constituted an imposition on the CAP manager, coaches and/or athletes.

The research context: The CAP

The CAP reflects the broader contemporary philosophy of coach education in Aotearoa New Zealand, which has experienced a paradigm shift from education to development. This shift was reflected in the New Zealand Coach Framework (SPARC1, 2006) that foregrounded formal and informal coach learning and aligned with an applied athlete-centred philosophy and focus on sharing to enable learning (Cassidy & Kidman, 2010). The CAP thus contrasts to one-off professional learning, which has typically been the dominant model of professional development provision in coach education (Culver & Trudel, 2008; Cushion, et al., 2003). It was established in 2009 with the stated objective "to

create New Zealand coaches capable of producing World, Olympic and Paralympic champions within five years” (SPARC, 2010). Coaches working at high performance level, as defined by the National Sports Organisations (NSOs) apply for a place on the programme and require nomination and endorsement from their respective NSO. The programme seeks to develop coaches who coach different sports, and who have different levels of experience in high performance contexts. Thus, the CAP coaches work in diverse contexts and in differing roles but are not apprentice coaches. Selection involves a rigorous process, whereby coaches are nominated by their NSO, apply in writing² and are short-listed. Short-listed applicants participate in an interview that involves a seamless series of realistic role simulations (coaching, partnering interactions, decision challenges and judgements) designed to reflect issues and situations typically experienced by a Head Coach. The applicants then receive feedback about the application process.

The CAP comprises technical, residential and individual programmes. The technical programme is linked with the NSOs and focuses on sport specific needs to develop the coach. The residential programme involves a series of 3-4 day residential ‘camps’ for the coaches in each cohort group. As we discuss further below, learning activities at the camps are diverse. They are designed to enhance learning and develop coaching skills amongst the group members, promote application of learning in individual contexts, and facilitate development of learning relations within group. The individual programme involves the coach working one-on-one with a High Performance Coach Consultant (HPCC) dedicated to that coach, with a mentoring orientation to the role and relationship. The consultants work with the CAP coaches to facilitate a Individual Development Plan (IDP), regularly review this, and give the coaches feedback on their coaching.

To date there have been 36 coaches selected for the programme, with the cohorts comprising 6 coaches in 2009; 6 in 2010, 6 in 2011, 5 in 2012, 6 in 2013 and 7 for the upcoming 2014 CAP. Our data collection focused primarily on the coaches entering the programme in 2010. Data collection comprised:

- i. Reflective individual in-person and/or skype interviews with coaches from 2009 and 2010 CAP intakes and with athletes linked to these coaches. The number and selection of coaches and athletes from these groups involved negotiation with the Sport NZ research management staff, CAP manager and

individual coaches and athletes. Interviews were semi-structured, directing attention to the programme itself, the effect of CAP on coaching, any gained learnings and any challenges arising. In total 5 coaches from 2009 and 4 from 2010 were interviewed, and a total of 6 athletes linked to 2009 coaches and 6 athletes linked to 2010 coaches have been interviewed.

ii. Participant observation during 2011 and 2012 at residential camps held for coaches who had commenced the CAP in 2010. Presence at camps and/or specific parts of them was negotiated on an ongoing basis with the CAP manager and coaches, with a particular concern to avoid any negative impact on the group's development and taking into consideration that increasingly the CAP manager faced many requests from 'outsiders' involved in high performance to join the CAP coaches at camps.

iii. Ongoing interviews with the CAP manager in person, via skype and telephone (to date 6 interviews). These interviews were relatively unstructured and designed to be conversational, enabling open reflection and discussion about the programme in the light of the most recent camp and/or feedback the manager had received from coaches

iv. Individual interviews with CAP 'support staff' including High Performance Coach Consultants (HPCCs) appointed to work with individual CAP coaches, and staff within High Performance Sport NZ (n=4) with involvement and interests in the programme via their positions/roles. These interviews were semi-structured and addressed their roles in the programme and their work with the coaches.

In addition to the above data collection, in-depth interviews and observations were sustained with two coaches who had commenced the CAP in 2010 over a period of approximately two years (2011 and 2012). This aspect of the data collection was shaped by ongoing negotiation of participation with the coaches concerned, the practicalities of their specific coaching contexts and commitments (relating to location at various times and the nature of their coaching context), and resource constraints of the project.

Ethical approval for the project was gained through ethics committees at the researchers' universities. All interview data has been transcribed and copies of transcripts provided to participants to self-check and make adjustments if desired. Data analysis has involved collective and ongoing re-reading, coding and classification of data to identify key themes. This paper reflects that a particularly prominent and recurring theme arising from analysis of data from multiple

sources related to the development of a distinct culture of shared learning. Pursuing this theme in the data, we progressively generated sub-themes that are reflected in the discussion that follows. It is important to note that CoP is the conceptual lens we have brought to the data having been emerged in the research context. In progressively developing the programme, the CAP Manager did not specifically seek to respond to the research cited above centring on CoP. Rather the emphasis on learning within communities that has ultimately emerged reflects his growing belief that this direction would best facilitate and support development of the CAP coaches.

Findings and Discussion

A Culture of learning and sharing

Previous research has pointed to the importance of cultivating a culture of learning and sharing to enhance the function of a CoP (Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Cassidy; et al., 2006; Culver & Trudel, 2006). This is reflected in the data that repeatedly points to CAP coaches who are highly committed to personal development, to the CAP and shared learning within the programme and with the other CAP coaches within their cohort particularly. In this section we therefore focus on findings that provide insight into the development of a community and culture of learning and sharing, central to which are openness and trust.

Diversity of membership is a key factor and strength of the learning community

Over the course of the research many of the coaches highlighted that the bringing together of coaches from diverse sporting codes and contexts has been fundamental to the culture and relations arising from the CAP. Coaches believe that the networks and shared learning that they are able to engage in through the CAP would rarely be seen in sport-specific coaching/performance contexts. The diversity of sports and contexts represented in the CAP has, with effective management, enhanced dialogue and trust amongst the coaches and created a strong sense of belonging to an intake group and to the CAP. From observation and interview data, it has been evident that the differences in coaching contexts, but similarities in high performance roles, has contributed to positive relations amongst the CAP coaches and extending learning opportunities. This distinguishing feature of the CAP programme is reflected in these comments from athletes and the programme manager:

“the collegiality. One of the things that I think is a great feature of the [CAP], ... you wouldn't get those coaches from those different sports spending time in each other's environments which they do relatively often. ... you don't get a bike coach spending time with the [name] Cricket Team or the [national team] Coach going to Invercargill to attend a cycling camp... or a cricket coach going to a netball environment to see how they prepare for games and vice versa... and the rowing coaches spending time with the swimming coaches because they're physiologically based programmes and they try to share ideas. Those things I think are real positive features” (CAP Manager Interview).

“I definitely think he's taken a lot from the programme and tried toBecause there are different sports from what I hear, different coaches and learning off them. It's not clear, because he won't voice that he's taken this from the Accelerator Programme, but ...Yeah, I think he's probably chatted to some of the other team coaches and asked what their standards and what their selection criteria is and I think he's definitely making a stance about it.” (Sam – Athlete Interview).

The CAP gives coaches a focus, a challenge to continue to develop and learn, and this appears to be enhanced by the diversity of coaches in the programme. As one coach identified, the CAP community presents opportunities to think beyond established boundaries:

“That was another part of the attraction of getting onto the course as well. My sport ... is quite insular at times. I think it's very old school in the way that coaches are selected and the way we go about some of the environmental factors of what [sport] is about, I think it's really ingrained in tradition ... well I've got the chance to work along with 4 or 5 other coaches and with all the other sports now, ... and you can learn so much from them as well.” (Georgy - Coach Interview).

Occhino et al's (2013) study on AFL coaches would tend to support the stance that the learning capacity of the community is extended by it incorporating coaches from varied sporting codes. Their study found that coaches tended to form dynamic relationships as they did not feel comfortable relating to particular club coaches or direct opponents, turning instead to 'influential coaches' from a range of sporting codes, whom they perceived as able to offer the support that they were seeking. Trust, openness and honesty were highly influential to establishing and maintaining a strong learning community.

Within a CoP, the ability to have open conversations is linked to individuals being able to contextualise learning and thereby, gain trust (Cushion, 2011b; Occhino, et al., 2013). The CAP reaffirmed to us the skill and planning required to achieve such openness and progressively build trust in the context of a structured coach development programme. Establishing rapport and trust among group members was an explicit priority for the CAP manager in organising the first two camps.

Participation observation at camps has clearly demonstrated that trust and shared recognition of the importance and value of each others' perspectives, were well established and valued features of the group. Some of the coaches commented on the role of the CAP manager in initially establishing and subsequently maintaining this trust:

“[To gain trust] we talked about it at the first. We said how we wanted to be as a group. We did a vision, “ How do we want to be as a group and how do we want to be seen by the coaches? How do we want to be interacting with one another?”

...”we have to have a confidential group and trusting.” (Sandy – Coach Interview)

“There’s a whole heap of things that we’ve all shared in that group that you know, if we went to the media they’d have a field day. You just need to understand it’s a great environment and you don’t want to ruin it by one person speaking out of school you’d lose the whole trust element and you wouldn’t be able to go as deep into issues as you do...” (Matthew – Coach Interview)

Further comments from coaches supported this view and notably, identified trust and safety as extending beyond the formal CAP contexts, to being acknowledged by the coaches as a feature of their wider, informal communication and networking:

“It’s a really nice environment at the moment where all over the world we’re regularly communicating now and when we come together at camps it’s a

really rich learning environment. The guys are able to relax in a safe environment and an accountable environment where they are valued and respected and share some stuff which I think ultimately grows us all.” (Fenaug - Coach Interview)

Both formal and informal learning (and networks) have contributed to the development of the culture and community.

The networks of learning and support associated with the CAP are multiple and inter- related, centring on each intake group and camps held for the group, while at the same time also developing beyond this. Individual coaches have been able to develop highly valued peer support networks with particular colleagues from within their intake group. This is an example of the dynamics of learning evolving (Light & Dixon, 2007; Occhino et al., 2013), whereby informal networks, communication and learning evolve (and are actively developed by members of the CoP) to be multi- faceted and multi-level. The CoP is set up as a formal network, yet when the group is not together, members utilise and rely on informal networks to help their learning. In these terms, the developing CAP networking aligns with Mallett et al’s (2008) description of a dynamic systems network.

Our data has pointed to dynamic, informal learning opportunities as an invaluable dimension of the CAP from the coaches’ perspective. Informal learning has continued to occur beyond the residential camps and through a range of experiences and communication. One of the coaches explained:

“The stuff I’ve learnt from other people has been a real eye opener and one of my goals was to spend time in other high performance environments so going along to [place] and spending time with the [sport] and really getting a feel for what goes on in their sport.” (Marley - Coach Interview)

The growing strength of the CAP coaches as a community characterised by the diversity, trust and learning networks described above, is in the view of one of the HPCCs, evident in the changes seen with coaches using the programme, including a mutual language and understanding of coaching:

“Well you observe the changes in the people, they start using different language. The biggest thing is that they start to be able to articulate what they are doing better and it has a better train of thought attached to it. So that it’s uncovering layers and then they start to make clearer decisions off that,

whereas before they were making clearer decisions but then they couldn't figure out why it had gone wrong so quickly. ...Whereas up till then everything has been very pragmatic, very rote, that's how I've done it before or I've experienced it from somebody else before. "(Kai – HPCC Interview)

Structure and support for the culture and community

In relation to structure, opportunity and support for the culture and community, residential camps, mentors and the programme manager are identified as all highly influential to the programme's success. However, it is also evident that though the time together is invaluable, that in their individual coaching environments, finding time and space to learn and develop is difficult. The transfer of learning into the actual setting is also challenging. Coaches and athletes have acknowledged that this needs to be approached with some caution in order to avoid perceptions of too dramatic and/or too many changes in coaching approaches, relations and/or expectations.

Residential Camps

The purpose of the camps is to gain information and learnings that can be applied. The CAP manager uses the intake community to promote shared learning, and brings in individuals with specialist knowledge and experience in certain areas. From participant observation, the topics covered have focused on pedagogy (coaching and learning) and leadership, with little or no emphasis on the more traditional sport sciences, nor sport specific techniques. At camps, where most were spent of which were held in a secluded setting, attention has variously been focused on communication, reflection, self-awareness, creating and selling a vision, leadership and relationship building. Activities such as visits to professional and organisational settings, expert guest workshops, and coaches' case study presentations have facilitated these foci. Commenting on the reflection as part of their learnings presented, one coach acknowledged:

"I haven't been fantastic on reflections in the last - forever really. But now I keep a much better diary of my reflections. My man management is fantastic with athletes, my man management with staff above me - my patience hasn't been all that flash, but some of the exposure I've had through Coach Accelerator has probably helped me develop a better working relationship." (Blare – Coach Interview)

As explained, in the initial camps for each cohort the CAP manager has explicitly focused on trust of/amongst the group, and highlighted the importance of learning together. Shared learning also features and is facilitated at camps through 'case study' activities. For each camp, coaches prepare a case study in the form of an actual scenario from their current coaching experience. This is presented as a story and then opened up for discussion with the other coaches. The shared reflection of events (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006) encompasses both pedagogical and managerial perspectives and centres on coaches' personal coaching environments. Douglas and Carless (2008) found that stories have been effective in stimulating interest and discussion among coaches, and provide a medium for engaging with questioning, summarising and ways of incorporating response styles into coaching experiences and development. These strengths have been evident in our observations, where first the coaches questioned the different scenarios for clarification and understanding, then summarised the major points of the stories, then related their own situations to incorporate the information from the case study. From observing the coaches' discourse and from ensuing evaluations of the camps, it is apparent that the case studies have been a powerful tool for coach learning. The challenge that coaches have faced to relate the scenario to their own context has prompted a deeper level of thinking and reflection (Cassidy, et. al., 2009; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), and helped coaches to assimilate ideas about their own coaching.

"Every time we are going through a case study and presentation we're listening to it through our eyes and thinking about the coach with a case study and how it impacts our practice. So I think that's some of the really most useful pedagogy that we've been learning, ... it's helped me make decisions." (Marley -Coach Interview)

The case studies have also again brought to the fore the value of the mix of contexts represented by the CAP coaches, with this serving to challenge and extend coaches' thinking about specific coaching issues or situations, and also, ways in which they might usefully extend their learning network:

"The mix of people makes you realize that some of the challenges that you face are not individual to your scenario. Like that is just part of the beast so immediately that opens your mind to learning from others because you are just constantly reminded that ... there's a [team name] coach with exactly the same problem as I do with athlete motivation. If I can speak to him about athlete motivation maybe I can speak to a math's teacher about periodised planning" (Marley - Coach Interview)

Mentors

In the CAP each of the coaches has the opportunity to choose a mentor, with this relationship acknowledged as largely informal. Mentoring is an interesting term, as it signifies one who has more power than the other, helping someone else to learn (Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2010). Lave and Wenger (1991) and others refer to mentors who can enable learning, as 'experts'. The CAP coaches have demonstrated that their 'mentors' do not have to be 'experts', but rather, need to be people that they trust to help them in within a particular situation. The CAP Manager explained:

"We encourage all of them to have mentors and in fact the mentors are invited to contribute to when we do their IDP and some of them brought them along and some of them didn't. Some of them also have mentors that are outside of their sport ... So each of them have got people that they use. It's not a formal arrangement, so there is not a requirement that they must meet regularly with that person and document it. It's on an 'as needs' basis because realistically they should have the support of ... there's sort of several layers of the sport around them and the other layer of support that they do have and I think what has been a feature of the programme is each other, and in fact in one of the other groups, one of the coaches revealed that he was struggling with certain areas and two of the other coaches took it upon themselves to mentor him through that, and they are continuing to do that." (CAP Manager Interview)

In relation to the latter point, Cushion and Denstone (2011) advocate for mentors who are participants not 'knowledge givers', pointing to the social and cultural context as extremely important. Within each CAP intake, the social and cultural context has focused attention on trust and mutual respect. Hence, the mentor relationship is strong amongst the CAP coaches.

"I use [coach name], I've done a little bit with him and I say the way he doesn't come across like it but he is very....He's got a lot of empathy for his players and he's taught me how to listen and that's something that I really needed - to be able to listen first- before you act - and he uses examples with me all the time with players that he's got around selection time... dropping players ... which is probably the worse job I reckon as far as being a coach and you know just the

way you deal with that, the way you work with that.” (Charlie - Coach Interview)

“Then there’s the group, the big Coach Accelerator guys themselves. We are now at the stage we are emailing group emails a lot and there’s always something that will come out of those. That group is really important. [Coach name] who I work with through the [CAP], he’s another guy who is specifically helping me with being clear and strong.” (Fenaug - Coach Interview).

Support staff

As some researchers have emphasised (see Culver & Trudel, 2006; Culver, et al., 2009) ongoing facilitation is a key to providing and maintaining social phenomena to enhance learning. In the CAP there are two major support staff for each coach, the CAP Manager and the HPCC assigned to the CAP coach. In the interview and participant observation data, it was evident that the role of the CAP Manager in facilitating and maintaining the community of trust and its networks cannot be overstated. This is reflected in comments from one of the coaches:

“The biggest thing about a programme like this is generally the people and when you take away the leader of the people, it starts to break down. My biggest fear is that someone like [CAP Manager] is going to become sick of it and is going to move on. They [would be] taking away a leader of the programme who is being very innovative....One of the strengths that he has is the ability to bind the people together and create that environment ... his ability to bind the group and facilitate the information and the information is huge. I think if you did a risk profile, the biggest risk would be losing the person who is leading the programme ... Regardless of the people outside of the structures and processes, it is the people who make it work.” (Mate - Coach Interview)

As part of the CAP structure to enhance learning, the HPCCs are formally assigned by HPSNZ to individual coaches and as explained above, their role centres on the IDPs and is to mentor coaches in the programme. The coaches comment on the value of the HPCCs being able to support not only their IDPs, but also their coaching more broadly, by giving feedback about their learning as it is applied to actual coaching:

“there is a variety of stuff. We get a 360 review, I get feedback questionnaires that go out to my athletes about how we are functioning as a coaching team.

Then feedback on how [HPCC name] observes so I bring him into camp environments... sometimes I just get him to observe in general, whatever feedback, sometimes he will structure the questions around the IDP... he sits down with us and [my sport] has a coach profile as well, so 360, feedback here, feedback here, just helping to collate it and question me about how I want to utilise it and what I am going to do with it. Then I go away and create a plan and come back and we debrief it and review it and how is it really going to work, and how I am going to use [HPCC name] to give me feedback and questioning. He also acts as a sounding board for what I do..." (Mate - Coach Interview)

The HPCCs also find value in the role and relationship and see the change and learning that occurs with the CAP coaches:

"if you looked at [sport] for example, [High Performance Coach Manager's name] will have some input into the plan, the coach will have some input into the plan. I'll have some input into the plan and there will be some feedback assessment that has gone on through [CAP coach's name] programme. We are very careful not to load them up too much. So we tend to work on three things ... within the feedback document and we're trying to align what the High Performance Manager is seeing with what is coming back in the feedback document with what I'm noticing as well, with what the coach might think is important. [CAP coach's name] for example completely prepared his own plan, came up with a different format in a different way and it looked like a really good plan. [CAP coach's name] needed a little bit more help, in terms of preparing it, not finding the meat to go in it or just in terms of setting up the document and figuring out when will you measure, how often will you measure, what will success look like? What are the actions going to be? How does that support which goal, which objective? And how does that feedback into the profile?" (Robyn - HPCC Interview)

The significance of structures, resourcing, and individuals, has been very apparent in our data. In now turning to what we have identified as tensions, challenges and opportunities associated with the ongoing development of the CAP, it is evident that programmes such as the CAP need to encompass support for those in leadership and facilitation roles, and for their needs to be acknowledged amidst efforts to extend and strengthen a group such as this as a Community of Practice.

Issues arising: Tensions, challenges and opportunities amidst the ongoing development of the CAP

Relevance and meaning

In expanding and continuing the CAP, a key challenge is to ensure ongoing engagement in learning. As we discuss further below, it is this that is arguably key to the CAP achieving sustained impact. As all coaches will appreciate, time to devote to learning and to the CoP is a constant pressure. In this context, the CAP coaches are prepared to make clear judgement calls in regard to their participation in aspects of the programme. Reflecting on a session at one of the camps, a coach explained:

“I think some of the most relevant stuff that we do, is actually sitting around the table chewing the fat The lecture this morning, you know, full respect for what [the presenter’s] talking about ... but I don’t see relevance and so I had to leave. I’ve got a shit load of other stuff that I could be doing right now, I don’t think that this is quite relevant to me at the moment. I suppose it’s something I’ve learnt from the [coach accelerator] programme. In the past I would have sat here and just wasted an hour and a half of my life.” (Charlie - Coach Interview)

As highlighted in preceding sections, personal meaning is a key to learning, and without perceived relevance of the information or practice, coaches will become disconnected (Mallett, et al., 2009). One coach found the case studies irrelevant and their sense of belonging was undermined because of this lack of meaning:

“I find it interesting hearing their perspective but I’m disconnected from it a lot of the time and I probably look like that half the time too. I think they look at me like is there like anything you’ve heard and I’m like “No. Not really.” And they’ve got different interests, like at the end of the day they’re used to card games and swearing and it’s just different, it’s just not in our environment, in my environment. They’re just not things we do.” (Andie - Coach Interview)

Linked to relevance and meaning is a concern for continuity in learning over the course of participation in the programme. Again, this is an issue that is important in considering maintenance and ongoing development of a CoP (Culver, et al., 2009).

“I’m not sure if I think there could potentially be some better techniques of harnessing all of the information that we receive in a short period of time during the camps, and whether that sort of follow up on some specifics. I feel that sometimes with different camps we’ve been exposed to things but haven’t reaped the full reward specifically. We’ve kind of moved on to the next camp ... There’s been some continuity, but I think it’s been possibly a little hap hazard ... that environment, I think it would be really good to do some case studies on how we have applied some of the specifics of the course and going through that process would probably help us to realize how much of a positive impact the programme has had and it might also enhance it yeah, for the quality of the learning.” (Marley - Coach Interview)

Continuity of learning beyond the duration of participation in the formal programme is also an issue that is acknowledged as well worthy of further exploration.

Network relations

As indicated, the networks associated with the CAP are diverse in membership and extensive in scope. Further, they are multi-faceted. Arguably one of the biggest threats for coaches in the CAP is that there is so much input going into their coaching. They have the formal elements of the CAP, HPCCs who are serving as mentors, High Performance Directors specific to their sport, their NSO, the media, Olympic Committees, personal coaches when athletes are in their home bases and more. One HPCC recognised the management of this as being a challenge:

“I think if the coach is the centre of it. One of things to notice is that there can be a whole lot of inputs going into the coach and you’ve got to be mindful, so one of the coaches in [city name] had a significant mentor who he suggested, arranged, worked with himself and I worked with this coach for, 6 or 7 years, really quite strong positive relationship and I was happy for that to happen and did not need to have any interaction there at all because it was just another brick in the wall.” (Nicky - HPCC Interview)

Meanwhile, for coaches continuing in the CAP there is a need for a flexible approach to programme management that enables learning opportunities and time-frames to be adapted to suit individual learning needs and coaching contexts. It is also important for further work to be directed towards shared

visions and understandings amongst the various stakeholders in the programme and associated with any individual participating coach.

Change of structure

Programme structures are always susceptible to wider organisational changes. HPSNZ and Sport New Zealand (SNZ) have gone through a major restructure during the course of this research. HPSNZ became its own entity, with responsibility for and control of high performance sport. Amidst this change there was a review of CAP and personnel who for various reasons, moved on, including three HPCCs. Some CAP coaches were more affected than others and the restructure affected the CAP manager and the HPCCs, in that there were new policies, different time constraints and a considerable period of adjustment.

The future and sustainability

Any programme with a specified time period of funding is destined to generate questions about sustainability. The CAP represents a significant investment in the advancement of coaching in New Zealand, which is openly acknowledged and greatly appreciated by the coaches who have had the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the programme.

“I think the cool thing is we’re not even half way through the [CAP] so we’re sort of thinking if this is where we’ve got to after a year and a bit where are we all going to be after three years and we’re already starting to talk after three years surely this can’t just be it. What’s next for us? I think without exception we’ll keep in touch if there was going to be no formal structure for it, but we’re talking about ways we can either wean ourselves off the [CAP] or continue together as a group in some other way because I think the philosophy of the [CAP] with ...different codes coming together is tremendous.” (Fenaug - Coach Interview)

One of the major findings of Culver et al's (2009) research was that once the programme was completed and the facilitator moved on, the CoP was not able to sustain the ongoing learning, and the participants returned to previous ways of doing things. Though sustainability has not been determined with CAP (as only two groups have finished the formal programme thus far), it is a serious concern for many who are associated with the programme. The CAP Manager explained:

“I’d like to think that a lot of the changes that have occurred, the coaches see them as now embedded in their practice. So from that perspective I would imagine that they are sustainable over the long term, lasting changes over time that they have implemented as a result of the process that they’ve gone through ... that action learning cycle and that they’re seeing the benefits of them so that they are getting reinforced for doing it that way, so they keep on doing it.” (CAP Manager Interview)

Conclusion

This paper has reflected that to a great extent, the strength of the CAP as a programme that was intended to facilitate and support the ongoing professional development (through an athlete centred coaching approach (SPARC, 2006) and learning of coaches, lies in the community and culture that has been established to date. In pursuing this finding, we have found the concept of Community of Practice highly pertinent to engage with. Data has thus been analysed and reported using that lens, and we have thereby sought to gain depth of understanding of some of the subtleties and complexities associated with the learning relations and networks developed and emerging in the context of the CAP. We have highlighted that amidst an externally initiated and resourced programme, the community of coaches and support staff have developed an internal dynamic that has been key to extending learning amongst the members. Repeatedly, trust and shared values and individual coaches’ belief in the capacity of the programme and community to assist in advancing their coaching have come to the fore as critical features of the CAP. Further, all involved are acutely aware that the learning and learning relations achieved to date owe much to the skill and insight of the CAP manager and the collective input of all members of the community. The research has also identified notable challenges that need to be considered in order for the programme to achieve its aim of sustained influence on coaches as learners in high performance coaching contexts.

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