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Online Peer Mentoring and Collaborative Reflection: A Cross-institutional Project in Sports Coaching

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, calls have grown for the use of digital technologies to transform coach education and enhance student learning; however, empirical research evidence for their efficacy is lacking. This paper describes our initial experiences of a Higher Education Funding Council for England funded project, designed to facilitate online peer mentoring and collaborative reflection between bachelor degree students at two separate UK universities. So far, the pedagogical approach has been differentially effective, with three categories describing our current perceptions of successful and/or unsuccessful student engagement in it. Namely, students require an adequate knowledge base, an appropriate technological and personal skillset, and the attitudinal dispositions to deploy them effectively.

Keywords: peer learning; peer assessment; formative assessment; coach education.

Context

A growing number of universities now offer bachelor degree programmes in sports coaching (Lara-Bercial et al., 2016). Traditionally, formal coach education has been underpinned by behavioural and cognitive educational perspectives and psychological conceptions of learning (Cushion et al., 2010), with courses following a 'train and certify' approach (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), where tutors present 'gold standard' recipes for coaches to follow (Abraham & Collins, 2011). However, research has suggested coaches' needs were not being met with such courses (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003), with their impact on learning relatively low (Sáiz, Calvo, & Ibáñez Godoy, 2009), and coaches instead preferring informal, self-directed and socially mediated learning activities (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015).

As a result, there has been an increasing focus on social constructivist approaches in formal coach education. For example, the importance of coach mentoring is frequently discussed and mentoring schemes are commonly established by national governing bodies of sport (Jones & Simmons, 2010). Similarly, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of learning alongside peers within a Community of Practice is commonly cited as a mode of facilitating coach learning. It has also been suggested that the interaction and sharing characteristic of these approaches can effectively take place online (Dixon, Lee, & Ghaye, 2013), with digital technologies (e.g. social network and social media sites, blogs, web applications) put forth as methods to promote collaborative learning (Calderón, Lopez-Chicheri, Fernandez-Rio, & Sinelnikov, 2017).

Although digital technologies are said to allow individuals to share and collaborate, at relatively little to no cost, and with relatively little technical know-how (Hew & Cheung, 2013), advocacy for their use as a learning tool in coach education is based more on conjecture than empirical research (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014). We were awarded funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England's catalyst fund for "innovations in learning and teaching" to implement an 18-month project, the aim of which was to facilitate online peer-mentoring and collaborative reflection between student cohorts on two different bachelor degree programmes: University of Central Lancashire's (UCLan) BA(Hons.) in Sports Coaching and St Mary's University's (SMU) BA(Hons.) Physical and Sport Education.

Method

In January 2017, 97 level 4 students from SMU (31 females and 66 males, M_{age} = 20.25 years, SD = 1.91), and 26 level 5 (3 females and 23 males, M_{age} = 21.27 years, SD = 2.71) and 24 level 6 (2 females and 22 males, M_{age} = 22.75 years, SD = 4.50) students from UCLan were tasked with engaging in collaborative reflection across each other's' work. This interaction was to take place 'virtually' through the auspices of two different online platforms and mechanisms.

Firstly, following an introductory workshop to outline the concept of reflective practice, the SMU level 4 students (in groups of 4), were asked to provide weekly feedback and constructive criticism on the reflective online blog posts of a UCLan level 5 student. These blogs were part of the assessment on a year-long practical coaching module, with each blog publicly viewable through the

online blogging platform WordPress (www.wordpress.com). The intention was for comments to instigate subsequent debate and critical discussion between the students.

Secondly, following an introductory workshop to outline mentoring as a concept, each UCLan level 6 student was asked to mentor four SMU level 4 students. This took place via Coach Logic (www.coach-logic.com), an online video analysis and feedback platform that SMU level 4 students use to upload footage of themselves coaching. The UCLan level 6 students were asked to provide each of their 'mentees' with feedback and constructive criticism on their coaching delivery through Coach Logic's commenting function. Again, our intention was for these comments to encourage regular and ongoing dialogue and critical conversation between students. The students in the level 4 and 5 cohorts had no previous experiences of these tools and this type of interaction, while the UCLan level 6 cohort had prior experience of blogging using WordPress.

The project has been framed by a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2009), which allows us to make sense of our own emergent perceptions and interpretations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our intention here is not to verify a preconceived theory or formulate generalisable conclusions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), but to facilitate a more informed comprehension of the pedagogical approach under study (Hussein, Hirst, Salyers, & Osuji, 2014). The student interactions are discussed by the project team on a weekly basis via Skype and email, with staff also maintaining a reflexive diary in which we record our thoughts and observations, as well as notes on any communications pertaining to the project with students (i.e. emails, tutorials, informal conversations etc.). Comparative analysis of the raw data allows us to discover latent patterns (Locke, 2001) and develop categories of interest in an ongoing iterative basis.

At the end of the project (April 2018), students will also complete an end of module survey, designed to elicit their feedback on, and perceptions of, their participation in the pedagogical approach taken.

What we've learned so far

Three categories of interest have emerged from our analysis of the raw data collected so far.

Background knowledge

Student participation has been tentative from the outset, with very closed, confirmatory or corroborative questions offered and a lack of confidence apparent, especially in the contributions of the SMU level 4 students. Many seem to perceive they lack the knowledge required to 'challenge' the more advanced (in their eyes) UCLan level 5 students, with the vast majority seeming happy to act as recipients of knowledge from the older, UCLan level 6 students. Similarly, the UCLan level 6 students seem to view their role as that of a 'knowledge provider' for their less knowledgeable 'mentees'.

An explicit desire to appear 'right' has also been notable, which has seemed to dissuade some students from engaging, despite our conscious efforts to embed a philosophy of pragmatism, and modelling curiosity, inquisitiveness and doubt in our own practice. As such, while our desire to extend the peer group and redefine expertise (increasing breadth and depth of knowledge) was well-intentioned, it appears we should have given much greater consideration to students' pre-existing knowledge and the extent to which this provides them a firm base to work from. It certainly seems that pre-existing knowledge is crucial if collaborative problem solving (preceded by problem identification) is to take place.

Skillset

The introduction of 'another' social-media platform into students' digital ecosystem has been met with resistance, with anecdotal comments of "not another app" (UCLan level 6 student) hinting at some degree of saturation being reached. While it is often assumed that young people are "digital natives" (Prensky, 2006), our initial experiences suggest this is an over-generalisation. Both SMU and UCLan students have reported the process of uploading, viewing and sharing videos on the Coach Logic platform as being unintuitive, confusing and time consuming. Moreover, students across all three cohorts have exhibited little desire to 'learn' how to operate a new platform; indeed, one mentor-mentee group quickly migrated to Facebook, where they perhaps feel more comfortable, familiar and safe (i.e. they know how it works, and are less likely to make errors).

A lot of contemporary online interaction is constrained by a character limit (e.g. Twitter), predetermined emotions and feelings (e.g. Facebook) or hashtags and images (e.g. Instagram and Snapchat). This reductionist mentality also seems to have transferred to the mentor-mentee reflective space, with many student comments quite short and dualistic in nature e.g. "what was the purpose of your session?" (SMU level 4 student) and "the thing with a progression is that you don't want to progress it too fast as then the players won't have time to pick up what you was (sic) applying" (UCLan level 6 student). Similarly, without the instantaneous interaction that is characteristic of the aforementioned platforms, dialogue, responses and collaboration thus far have been slow to emerge and often require prompts from module staff.

More generally, many students also seem to lack the skills necessary to self-direct their learning, especially when it comes to self-monitoring skills such as time management, and the resilience needed to persevere whenever frustration or ambiguity is encountered e.g. "I'm finding it difficult to comment on the blogs. I don't know what to say. He seems to know so much more than me!" (SMU level 4 student). Consequently, we have identified a potential need for more explicit modelling of "what to do, where, how and when" to discourage students 'giving up' and disengaging.

Attitudinal disposition

From the outset, a latent desire for direction, guidance and certainty has emerged. Race (2014) suggests that assessment drives learning (i.e. students must *need* to learn), and students have indeed attributed a lack of engagement in mentor-mentee interactions to it "not counting" toward a final grade. While arguably misplaced, it seems students' conceptions of learning are blurred with performance, and the notion that engaging in "above and beyond" activities at the expense of "doing just enough" is perceived as risky and/or wasted effort.

Similarly, there has been a tension between our desire to develop expertise and the students' desire to 'just' develop the perceived competencies required to pass a module. This appears somewhat connected to tuition fees (currently £9,000 per year in the UK), with some students suggesting their main motivation is to "do what's needed to get the degree", as opposed to what might be best for long term learning. The challenge for us as educators, therefore, might be to develop strategies that support individual students in appreciating value beyond short-term performance and explore long-term learning and development. Herein also lies a challenge for organisations who develop coaches to consider what they assess and why (De Martin Silva, Fonseca, Jones, Morgan, & Mesquita, 2015). Certainly, some of the students involved in this project (at both institutions) seem to lack open-mindedness and a willingness to try a 'new' method of learning and teaching, instead stating a preference for what they perceive as 'better' pedagogical approaches (i.e. tutor-led lectures and written assignments with explicit instructions).

Conclusion

This paper describes the early stages of a cross-institutional project to facilitate online peer-mentoring and collaborative reflection between student cohorts on two different bachelor degree programmes. Our initial experiences suggest online peer mentoring and collaboration has not appealed to many, and what was intended to be the type of 'informal' learning activity sports coaches are said to prefer, might require a much more deliberative and/or formally structured implementation. At this stage, it seems that to garner maximum benefit from the approach, students require a sufficient knowledge base, an appropriate technological and personal skillset and the attitudinal dispositions to deploy them effectively. Without this, many students have disengaged or appear 'lost at sea', and would instead seem to prefer the types of educational approach this project set out to replace!

Biographies

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