
Culture, experience and the construction of views on coaching: Implications for the uptake of Game Sense

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ABSTRACT

Despite the apparent efficacy of Game Sense in coaching and interest in it across the world, its uptake by coaches still appears to be relatively limited. One of the reasons is the way it can conflict with the views and deeply held beliefs about coaching that are developed unquestionably over time. These views and beliefs are acutely shaped by experience; however, the processes involved in the construction of these views and beliefs are not yet well understood. This article draws on a study that inquired into how and what rugby coaches learn through experience, and the role that the socio-cultural context plays in shaping the development of their beliefs, to suggest how this may dispose them towards player centred pedagogies such as Game Sense. The findings reported are evidence of the importance of the social and cultural contexts that shape coaches' views and beliefs of coaching.

Keywords: rugby, coach development, Game Sense, experience, coaching beliefs

INTRODUCTION

The literature on teaching and coaching suggests that player/learner centred approaches such as Game Sense have much to offer coaches across a range of sports, but it also identifies a range of challenges for taking up this approach (see, Evans, 2014; Fry, Tan, McNeill & Wright, 2010; McNeill, Wright, Tan, Tan & Schempp, 2004; Roberts, 2011). This is largely due to the very different sets of epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning the traditional, technical approach, and the game based, player centred Game Sense approach (Light, 2008). Such assumptions reinforce or challenge teachers' and coaches' unquestioned beliefs about good teaching/coaching, as well as have a similar impact on their views of learning (Butler, 1996; Light, 2008). It is, therefore, important to understand how these beliefs and sets of dispositions are developed to enhance the uptake of player centred coaching approaches such as Game Sense. This article redresses this oversight by drawing on a study that inquired into how and what rugby coaches learn through experience, and the role that socio-cultural context plays in shaping these beliefs.

Experience and coach development

Light and Evans (2013) argued that the value of experience in learning to coach fundamentally places both the social and cultural contexts at the forefront of a coach's development. This is because coaches have a kaleidoscope of experiences, often spanning a lifetime in sport, influencing their views on coaching. These produce an embodied understanding and are a reflection of their deeply held views and beliefs. It is based on the same premise as those advanced by Jones, Armour and Potrac (2002) for viewing coach development as a process of socialisation. In this sense coaches' 'philosophies' (their guiding principles) that incline them to adopt a particular pedagogy, may in fact be idealised from their engagement in specific social and/or cultural contexts where certain behaviours may have been normalised.

Dominant assumptions in coaching: Neglecting the socio-cultural influence

Cushion, Armour and Jones (2006) argued that, 'the essential social and cultural elements...are often underplayed' (p.83) because research designs have tended to neglect the contextual realities of coaching. Recognising that coaching is deeply influenced by past experience, McKay, Gore and Kirk suggest that it may be likened to an 'autonomous body of facts passed through generations' (as cited in Cushion, 2001 p. 3). While this view highlights

the influence of context as social structure, it risks neglecting the agency of the coach in the process of developing knowledge. However, Potrac, Brewer, Jones, Armour, and Hoff (2000) challenged the dominant assumptions inherent in coaching to argue that the coaches' beliefs are not a rational implementation of effective coaching behaviours but instead, should be viewed as a social construction. With this attention to the social dimensions of coaching in mind, these factors – experiential and social – are brought to the forefront of this empirical research, the aim of which is to present findings into the inner most workings of what Cushion et al., (2006) call the 'messy' (p.95) aspects of coaching that are not well understood.

A shift in understanding coaching: Addressing the issue

The past decade or so has seen growing recognition of coaching as an inherently complex practice that is socially and culturally situated (e.g. Christensen, 2009; Cushion, 2007; Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Jones, Potrac, Cushion, & Ronglan, 2010) but much of this writing is limited to theorising with little empirical investigation (Jones et al., 2002). Despite identification of the powerful influence of experience on coach development and calls for inquiry into this area, there are very few empirical studies that have looked into how this occurs.

Harvey, Cushion and Massa-Gonzalez (2010) suggested that coaching may have a long pedagogical tradition that does not align itself with athlete-centred approaches such as Game Sense. The re-positioning of the coach from a director of learning to a facilitator creates considerable tension for coaches when trying to move toward a player-centred approach (Light & Evans, 2013). In this regard, Game Sense has been promoted in the coaching and physical education literature as an innovative and effective pedagogy that, among other strengths, can promote decision making, game intelligence, motivation, creativity and a real sense of team but its uptake in coaching is largely disappointing (Light, 2013). What is equally disappointing is that, even when it does seem to be taken up, it is often misinterpreted as the underlying principles of the approach are not well understood or incorporated (Jarrett & Harvey, 2014; Light & Evans, 2010). The problems involved in coaches taking up authentic forms of Game Sense and other player-centred coaching approaches seem to arise from sets of beliefs and dispositions of coaches developed within entrenched cultures of coaching (Harvey et al., 2010; Jarrett & Harvey, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The research approach

The research process is underpinned by a variety of influences, which impact on the types of data generated and their presentation (Crotty, 1998). This study was conducted within the interpretivist paradigm with its knowledge claims inherently place and time dependent. The constructivist epistemological stance from which it is conducted led to generating and presenting data that reflected the coaches' voices and their meanings resulting from their interactions with their social world of coaching. These relate well to the approach of later grounded theorists (see for example Charmaz, 2006; Clarke & Friese, 2010).

Grounded theory

There is much debate surrounding grounded theory (GT) as authors use, interpret and mould their own GT strategies (see for example Charmaz, 2006 and Clarke, 2005). There are claims that this strays from its roots with Glaser and Strauss, but they too have gone in separate directions. Therefore, the approach's flexibility is tempting for qualitative social researchers but also creates some difficulties when using it. In this study we have used two important components that are argued central to GT which are inductive logic and theoretical sampling. Induction refers to using data to develop and interpret findings which are a reflection of the data and the research site and not one's *a priori* theory on data, and theoretical sampling was used to achieve theoretical saturation as explained in the section below.

Sites and participants: Sampling of research sites

This paper presents data from three completed cases with each study comprising three coaches. Data generation began in Melbourne (Australia) with three rugby union coaches coaching at the premier grade level. They were purposively selected through contacts we had in Victorian rugby. Analysis of data from the Melbourne study identified very different approaches to coaching that seemed to be grounded in experience, as a player and coach, and in the home countries of each coach. Once this case was completed a theoretical sampling strategy was used to test and develop the emerging theory about the importance played in the socio-cultural contexts within which the coaches learned to play. This shaped the future direction of the study as outlined below.

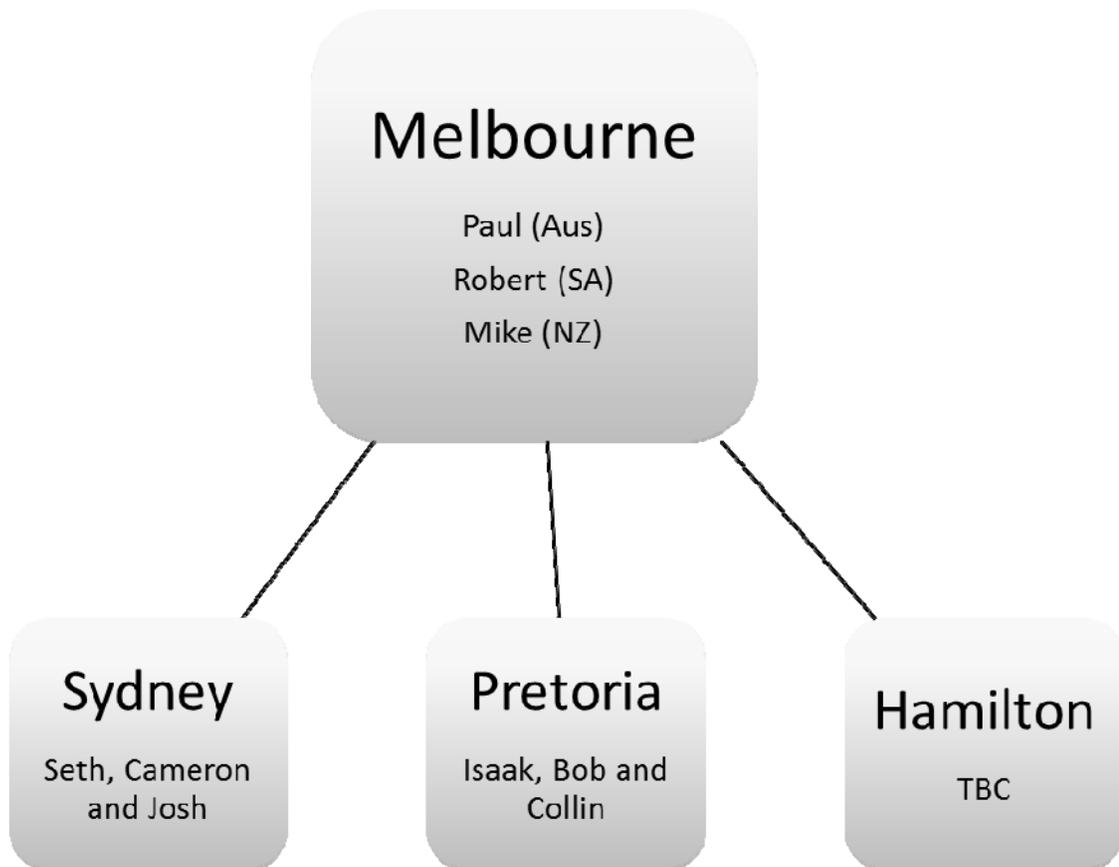


Figure 1
Theoretical sampling strategy

Figure 1 demonstrates the theoretical sampling strategies used and their impact on the choice of the subsequent research sites. The research began with three coaches, Paul, Robert and Mike in Melbourne (Australia). Although they were coaching in Melbourne at the time of the study, they had grown up and played all of their rugby in three different countries. Paul was from Australia, Robert from South Africa and Mike from New Zealand. Therefore, cases in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand were used as research sites to develop the emerging theory that Paul, Robert and Mike's differing views on and beliefs about coaching derived from their involvement in rugby from different socio-cultural contexts. It was also used to understand the processes and influences that had led to the construction of those views. This led to studies in Sydney involving three coaches: Seth, Cameron and Josh because of the importance of Sydney on the development of Australian rugby; and in Pretoria, involving the

three coaches: Isaak, Bob and Collin for its affiliation with Afrikaans¹ identity because Robert was Afrikaans. Research in Hamilton is to be completed (TBC) in July 2014. This approach follows Dey's (2010, p. 178) suggestion that: "Theoretical sampling in grounded theory is driven primarily by the requirement of systematic comparison in a variety of settings of the factors encompassed by the social process under investigation".

METHODS

The primary data sources were in-depth, conversational interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) with a few guiding questions to test emerging ideas with each coach. The participants provided consent to have the interviews audio recorded which were then transcribed verbatim. Coaches received a copy of the transcript and could choose to make changes, only Isaak corrected the spelling of some of the places he mentioned in his interviews. They also consented to observations of training. Non-participatory observations of trainings were noted in a research diary. The first author attended at least one training session at each club. The interviews were arranged at a time convenient to the coaches and ranged from meeting at their workplace, to in a café, or 'going for a walk' after training.

Data generation and analysis

We use the term data 'generation' instead of 'collection' to underline the different ontological stance it sits upon and the constructivist nature of the GT used (Charmaz, 2006). The initial interview had some guiding questions, which were directed at understanding the views and beliefs coaches had of their role as a coach, and were transcribed verbatim. Since data analysis is an ongoing process in GT, an account of some of the steps in data generation and analysis will be described with some of the important tools and strategies used. Once an interview was conducted it was transcribed verbatim as soon as possible. During transcription notes were made in a research diary on things that needed clarity. This provided an overview of the interview and an understanding of the big ideas (Richards, 2010). These were then compared to the other coaches in the site and provided some guiding questions for subsequent

¹ Afrikaans can represent both the West Germanic language, and/or a population group in South Africa, for example an Afrikaans person or Afrikaans speaking. As an ethnic group, they represent those who are predominantly the descendants of Dutch settlers.

interviews. Interviews were then coded line-by-line (Glaser, 1978) after Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) suggestions of picking out relevant text were followed. Memos and situational maps were used to develop themes from which to conceptualise the data into emerging categories (Clarke & Friese, 2010 & Lempert, 2010).

FINDINGS

Melbourne

The complexity of this case highlighted the impact of socio-cultural experiences on coaches' views and beliefs about coaching. The practice of each one of the coaches and their beliefs about coaching were distinctly different with these differences linked to the cultural context within which they learnt to play and coach rugby. In Robert's case the influence of Afrikaans culture – as symbolised by 'collective discipline in the prosecution of a general cause' (Archer & Bouillon as cited in Black & Nauright, 1998, p. 10) on him is strongly evident in the following quote: '...if you come to 1st grade level and you feel personally hard done by if you get dropped then maybe you should consider playing netball.'

Paul was critical of the Wallabies under the coaching of Robbie Deans at the time of the study for not developing smart, thinking players. He felt the approach was too structured and lacked the flair, risk taking and creativity that were the hallmarks of Australian rugby. These traits he said were most noticeable during the period he called, the 'decision-making era'.

This approach to coaching and playing had a powerful influence on Paul's coaching:

We came through a decision making process, it was all about decision making, so you were crème de la crop...the hardest thing I'm trying to get players to do is to think about the game. Why would you run through that fellow there, why would we do something else, why would we do a chip kick, why wouldn't we try this, why wouldn't we try that, to get them to think more about the game? I think the issue is...they're not thinking about the game.

Mike had a strong cultural connection to his home country and the meanings attached with rugby. He emphasised the influence of Māori culture on it and felt it was spiritual: '...in New Zealand the influence of the Maori culture on all of us, and in particular on rugby, rugby is spiritual in New Zealand, you know more than anything else it's spiritual'. However, his

views and how they relate to his socio-cultural development will be explored later in the year and thus are not presented in the findings.

Pretoria

Although Robert at the time of the study was coaching in Melbourne, he learnt to play and coach in an Afrikaans region in South Africa. There was a remarkable resemblance to the coaches I interviewed in Pretoria reflected by his strong focus on developing respectful, disciplined players. He described his approach as being ‘permissive democratic’, saying that, ‘I allow input, I’m happy to take input, but I make the ultimate decision, and I’m happy to make hard decisions’. He expected to be respected for making the tough decisions: ‘I don’t try to be popular...that quite often prevents you from making tough decisions. If you try and be popular it just doesn’t work. You should be respected but you don’t have to be popular, big difference!’

These same views were very evident among the three coaches, Isaak, Bob and Collin in the Pretoria study and were underpinned by a belief in the need for a hierarchical relationship between coach and player – one built on respect as suggested to be a reflection of Afrikaner nationalistic attitudes (Allen, 2003). This element of respect for the coach was seen as an important indicator of whether or not he would be successful. For these coaches being respected was a priority much like being a ‘pack leader’:

Why I’m saying respect must be earned is because players must believe in you, if players don’t believe in you they’re quickly going to test you, you know what you don’t get a better example than lions. Lions will always go and test the highest authority, see if this guy really is who he says he is. (Bob)

The hierarchal structures valued by the three Pretoria coaches were based in a conservative culture in which respect and leadership is prompted, at times out of fear, representing the nexus between Afrikaans culture and the sport of rugby in developing and forming Afrikaans identity (Grundlingh, 1995). The militaristic overtones of this approach to coaching are not surprising because many South African coaches grew up at a time when military service was compulsory.

Fear also featured in interviews with the Pretoria coaches when recounting their experiences of rugby, almost as residual elements of fear embodied long ago. For example, Collin said ‘it

was a more disciplined era that we grew up in, where now days it's much more laid back.' Furthermore, this was starkly evident during a discussion with Bob about the coach's role: 'You know someone once said to me your coach is like your father, you must love him but you must still be afraid of him'. Similarly, this element of fear was what Isaak meant when referring to the coach needing to be 'felt'. He did not feel a coach had to be a dictator, but thought that it was important for a coach to have a strong influence through a powerful presence: 'So for me coaching is like you need to reinforce yourself and to be felt but not to dictate everything, not to say no I'm the boss and everything like that, but you have to be felt somewhere'.

Sydney

Paul, who at the time of the study was coaching in Melbourne, was Australian and had learned to play and coach rugby in Australia. He valued developing thinking players and empowering them to think for themselves and not be reliant upon the coach for all the answers:

All I want [players] to do is to start thinking about what [they]'re doing, I don't want [them] to take it as gospel from me. I want [them] to think about how [they] can break down the opposition, I want [them] to think about things, I want [them] to think about how best we can beat them, start giving me ideas, I'm not the one out on the field [they] are.

Very similar views on coaching were articulated by the three coaches in the Sydney study: Seth, Cameron and Josh. In comparison to the Pretoria case, the Sydney case showed a dramatic difference in views on power relations between coach and players that suggested a very different pedagogical approach. The coaches in the Sydney study valued players' opinions and wanted to empower them.

Seth felt that it was important to let the players have ownership but that, as a more capable other, the coach needed to guide the players and 'steer them in the right direction'. He emphasized how important it was to empower players: 'So give them choices and give them ownership of those choices [but] you steer them in the right direction and then it's up to them to get the rest'. Josh felt that dictating to players would mean that sooner or later they would get fed up and stop responding. Like Seth, he felt that they need to have input into training and that they should be valued:

I think the most successful coaches are the ones that allow the players to feel as if they've got a part of it. So you know, you get a lot of dictators who come along, scream and shout and tell everyone we have to do things my way, and it will work for a little while but sooner or later people will get the shits and bail out of it.

Cameron felt that coaching was in some ways similar to teaching in that players needed to understand what they're doing and why. He felt that they needed to be independent, self-directed learners who can think for themselves. In the following quote he emphasises helping players learn instead of 'spoon feeding' them and the importance of understanding.

I guess a good coach is someone that teaches people along the way, it's not spoon fed to people where they just do and they don't even think about it. So coaching to me, especially in rugby, is getting players to understand why they are doing things in the game rather than just doing things in the game.

DISCUSSION

The three cases reported on here emphasize the powerful influence that experience within particular socio-cultural contexts have had on these coaches. Deeply held beliefs about coaching that are developed over a lifetime of participation in sport, play a powerful role in shaping the ways in which coaches (and teachers) interpret and use or don't use Game Sense. These studies did not focus on Game Sense but the insights they provide into the beliefs the coaches hold about coaching and the sets of dispositions they have toward ways of coaching, would dispose them toward Game Sense in particular ways. The study in Melbourne identified significant differences in the 'philosophies' and practices of the three coaches that appeared to originate from the three different countries in which they learned to play and coach. More specifically, they seemed to have been shaped by three quite different cultures. To test this emergent theory, separate studies conducted in Australia and Afrikaans South Africa lent strong support to the emergent theory developed from the Melbourne study.

The studies in Sydney and Pretoria identify distinctive sets of beliefs and dispositions that suggest very different attitudes toward Game Sense but the study in New Zealand is not yet completed. However, Evans' (2012, 2014) study on New Zealand rugby coaches interpretation and use of Game Sense suggests dispositions that would be reasonably well-disposed toward this approach.

The features of a Game Sense approach that make it an effective way of coaching present particular challenges for many coaches across different team sports (Harvey et al., 2010; Light & Evans, 2010; Roberts, 2011). These include the change in the role of the coach from director to facilitator of learning, the development of a more equal relationship with the players, empowering players to make decisions at and about training, and ‘letting go’ to allow the players to discover instead of being told (Light, 2004; Evans, 2014). This then strongly suggests that Robert and the three coaches in Pretoria would probably not be well disposed toward Game Sense because of their belief in the need for the coach to be a strong leader, as evidenced by the need for explicit displays of respect for the coach, hard discipline and a tightly structured power hierarchy.

There was variation between the coaches in Pretoria at an individual level, and they would likely interpret Game Sense differently but in general, the embodied culture of rugby would likely create tensions with the underpinning epistemology and ontology of Game Sense. This can be explained and understood through the application of Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* in both its individual and collective use (see Bourdieu, 1984) as has been done in previous research on rugby coaches’ dispositions toward Game Sense (Light & Evans, 2013). This is largely because of the tensions that exist with the unarticulated beliefs about knowledge, learning and coaching, that inform coaches’ practice at embodied levels (Light & Evans, 2013). This is also a problem in teachers’ interpretation of TGfU (see, Butler, 1996).

However, in contrast to Robert, who had learnt to play and coach in Afrikaans South Africa, Paul’s beliefs about coaching developed with what he describes as the ‘decision-making era’ in Australia, resonate with the features of Game Sense coaching and its underpinning assumptions. The beliefs of the three coaches in Sydney also align well with the principles and practice of Game Sense and we would expect that they would likely be positively disposed toward it. This then suggests that the culture of rugby coaching in Australia exerted a significant influence on the development of Paul’s dispositions toward coaching. Indeed, Paul was very firm in identifying what he called the twenty-year ‘decision-making era’ as the factor having the most influence on his coaching.

CONCLUSION

This examination of coaches’ beliefs about rugby coaching and their dispositions toward it, and how the cultural setting shaped their development, provides some useful understanding

of how long-term participation in the practices of rugby, with particular social and cultural contexts, shapes deeply held beliefs and dispositions in coaches. Although it focuses on three individual coaches at each of the three sites, it emphasises the powerful influence of socio-cultural contexts. This ranges from local immediate contexts within which particular dispositions toward rugby coaching are developed and the influence of different cultures such as the Afrikaans culture in Pretoria and the more commercial imperative shaping coaching in Sydney. While we situate the development of coach beliefs, dispositions and practice within particular socio-cultural settings they are not autonomous settings but, instead, are themselves situated in, and shaped by, larger forces. These include the field of sport (Bourdieu, 1984), business and the sub-field of rugby as a global sport, and a valuable commercial commodity with the interactions between these global and local influences exerting an influence on the development of the coaches in the study.

In this paper we are not attempting to be deterministic by saying that because we have identified particular sets of dispositions toward coaching that these coaches will necessarily reject or embrace a Game Sense approach. Instead, we want to highlight the complexity of rugby coaching, offer some insights into how the development of beliefs about coaching and dispositions toward it developed over time, and how these are shaped by environmental forces that *structure* the interpretation of Game Sense. This is important for developing understanding of coaches' interest in and views on player centred approaches such as Game Sense that is pivotal to the ongoing development of these approaches. It also makes a contribution toward our understanding and appreciation of the complexity and situated nature of coaching and coach development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the insightful suggestions and comments of the blind reviewers, which have helped us to achieve greater clarity and expression.

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