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Coach education as 'leading out with an experienced other'

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring to support coach development has gained traction over the past decade or so. A common criticism in this area is the shortage of research that captures the complex reality of interactions between mentees and mentors. In this critical commentary, we conceptualise this complexity, weaving together the authors' lived experiences as mentors and mentees, framed by an ecological dynamics perspective. Here, the mentoring relational process will be explored through the framework of education as *educere* (Latin: "to lead out") and the role of the "experienced other". An ecological dynamics rationale is centred on using "guidance without specification" and "attentive dwelling", fostering an evolving correspondence between coach and coach developer. As the mentoring relationship deepens, mentors can assist coaches in the ongoing search and exploration of their coaching landscape wit h a "knowing as we go" ethos.

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Introduction

Coach education is a significant component of a coach's learning journey, to assist development of knowledge and professional practice (Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). Yet, its application has been considered ineffective, uncritical and often critiqued for a lack of depth and failure to meet the needs of practitioners (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2013). There is little evidence to suggest that formal education inspires behaviour change in coaches (Stodter & Cushion, 2014). In response, the focus has shifted to the role of mentoring and informal approaches. Increased attention on mentoring in both academic and professional (governing body) sporting communities (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021) has

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focused on blending formal and informal learning with extensive work-based opportunities (Nash & McQuade, 2015). Despite its perceived positive and vast applicability, mentoring is fraught with complications due to lack of clarity around its purpose and the role of the mentor (Armour, 2015; Bailey, Jones, & Allison, 2019).

In previous attempts to critically appraise mentoring for sport coaches, social constructivist and interpretivist lenses have been used "to 'decode' the scarcely discussed culture of coaching" (Corsby & Edwards, 2019, p. 4). While this approach has undoubtedly progressed the emerging research fields of sport coaching and coach education, a lack of clarity remains surrounding the role of the mentor, what knowledge is and how it's grown in coaches, as well as the desired outcome of coach education to help practitioners navigate the complex and dynamic landscape of sport coaching. Our ego-centric focus on "the endemic contingency and uncertainty of the human condition" (ibid, p. 5) has created an organismic asymmetry (inordinate focus on internal models of the world) in our understanding of coaches' education and development (Davids & Araújo, 2010), when we should instead be recognising the value of complexity (focus on interactions between coach and environment).

To challenge the historical orthodoxies of sports coaching research, we explore the benefits of an ecological approach, centring on the integral interaction of coach and environment, refining the scale of analysis beyond social elements of coaching. In doing so, we propose that coaches continually adapt in direct interaction with the task constraints of coaching, and the social, cultural and historical constraints of a sport performance environment (Wood, Mellalieu, Araújo, Woods, & Davids, 2023). Through an ecological dynamics lens, we may acknowledge and respond to the dynamic landscape of sports performance and athlete development by designing coach learning opportunities that extend beyond reproduction, replication of, and compliance with, what others have done before. Furthermore, ecological dynamics may clarify the role that others play in a mentoring capacity and define the knowledge coaches need to adapt to their professional practice landscape.

Defining coach 'education'

Abraham and Collins (1998) implied that formal coach education is "unidimensional", driven by assessments, evaluations and prescriptions of "what" and "how" to coach, limiting opportunities for robust discussion, challenge, reflection and evolution (Dempsey, Cope, Richardson, Littlewood, & Cronin, 2021). Additionally, there has been increasing awareness of the need for informal coach learning (e.g. Werthner & Trudel, 2006) and that coaches seek learning beyond traditional coach qualification

settings (Stoszkowski, MacNamara, Collins, & Hodgkinson, 2020). Recommendations to address identified limitations of coach education have included implementation of competency-based programmes (Demers, Woodburn, & Savard, 2006), problem-based learning (Jones & Turner, 2006), mentoring schemes (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003) and communities of practice (Culver & Trudel, 2006), but there is little research on coach development. Given the complex nature of sports coaching, increasingly recognised as an interdisciplinary endeavour (Burns & Collins, 2023), and trepidation surrounding existing coach education (Webb & Leeder, 2022), we revisit the intention of coach education to develop coaches.

Craft (1984) stated that the English word "education" has two different contrasting Latin roots: *educare*, which implies to train or to mould, and *educere* which means to lead out. In coach educare, a coach who is moulded to pass an assessment and preserve the compliant transfer of knowledge, could potentially be ill-prepared to cope with the complex, intricate relationships and decision making evident within sport coaching environments. In contrast, educere offers an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and adaptability through a process of "enskilment" (Ingold, 2000; for a detailed exploration, see; Woods, Rudd, Gray, & Davids, 2021). Enskilment is gained while "attentively dwelling" in this context (embedded in a coaching context), where Ingold (2000, p. 5) illustrates that "the study of skill demands a perspective which situates the practitioner, right from the start, in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of [their] surroundings". Enskilment of the coach may be acquired through the promotion of initiative and creativity enhanced by a mentor dwelling in the coaching context and "leading out" the mentee (for an excellent example in the creative arts, see Ings, 2023).

The process of enskilment has an anthropological foundation, concerned with people and where they live. Coach education as "enskilment of the coach" frames the perpetually social elements within a broader ecology of relations, conceptualising the individual (coach) and their environment as inseparable. While the concept of enskilment has been previously applied to athlete development (Woods et al, 2021), coach development exists at a parallel, where coaches must learn to perceive relevant information sources and act in ways that support the learning and development of their athletes. An ecological approach does not circumvent the social elements of coaching, but rather highlights that it is just one of many environmental constraints on emerging behaviours. To capture the broader ecology of relations, we (as scientists, and coaches) must adjust our scale of analysis beyond the interactions between individuals. An ecological approach highlights the importance of individual-environment mutuality (Handford, Davids, Bennett, & Button, 1997): actions cannot exist in isolation from

their environmental context. A key implication of the analysis so far is that coach education is predicated on an emerging relationship within the environmental (coaching) context. With a "focus on leading another out into the world such that they can primarily experience things for themselves and not to reach some prior established convention about how things should be done" (Morris, Davids, & Woods, 2022, p. 9), an ecological approach could circumvent the current limitations of coach education.

Through "coach educere", our intention shifts to the growth of knowledge and skills through direct, guided experience of a coaching environment, rather than "filling people up" with knowledge that can only be transmitted by experts. A key distinction here is how we conceptualise knowledge. Social constructivism shares the belief that people are not empty vessels to be filled (Vinson & Parker, 2019). In this critical commentary, we draw our definition of knowledge from the ecological psychologist Gibson (1966), which recognises the social elements of learning and interaction are situated within a broader ecology of relations. Gibson's pioneering work has been applied to coaching through the theoretical framework of ecological dynamics (e.g. Seifert & Davids, 2017), an applied scientific framework that draws on related concepts across ecological psychology, dynamical systems theory and complexity science to explain how human behaviours such as learning, developing and performing emerge during transactions with the environment (Araujo et al., 2006).

Popularity of ecological dynamics in skill acquisition, sports pedagogy, coach education and talent development has increased in recent decades (e.g. Button, Seifert, Chow, Davids, & Araujo, 2020). Advances include application of key concepts in ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979) and social anthropology (Ingold, 2000) integrated into a comprehensive rationale for performance, learning and development, defined as "enskilment" in which learners are guided "without specification" to "dwell in" a coaching landscape and immerse themselves in *knowledge of* (Gibson, 1979) their environment (see also Stone, Rothwell, Shuttleworth, & Davids, 2021; Woods et al., 2021). This integrated framework posits the role of an experienced other to guide a coach in directly supporting exploration of their coaching landscape, seeking opportunities to act (affordances for coaching) that may have been unavailable in the second-hand information (*knowledge about* the environment; Gibson, 1979) of formalised coach education programs. This is a specialised role, requiring a deep familiarity with tenets of this theoretical framework to guide exploration and discovery without destabilising a coach to a point of overwhelming uncertainty.

As noted, an important tenet of ecological dynamics is the differentiation between two forms of knowledge: knowledge *about* an environment, and knowledge *of* an environment. Providing knowledge about an environment to a coach is reliant on using verbal instructions, graphics, pictures and

images which are indirectly perceived to access facts and augmented information *about* an environment. For example, a graphic depicting passages of play for a soccer training activity which animates circles representing the players' movement trajectories mediates perception of that activity during training and can be useful for "verbally describing what to perceive or even what could be done, but is rather limited in guiding them to directly interact with their surrounds" (Wood et al., 2023, p. 3).

An overreliance on knowledge about the environment detaches the coach (or any learner for that matter) from the unfolding world around them, propagating the use of second-hand information to recant instead of knowledge gained from directly engaging with performers. Subsequently, coaches may not be as responsive to immediate changes in the individual, task or environmental constraints of the training context, perhaps limiting the effectiveness of a training program and impacting the coach–athlete relationship. Our current approach to "coach *educare*" perpetuates this issue by not recognising the contextual complexity within which coaches perform. In contrast, coach educere aims to "improve and refine the functional fit between a coach and their coaching environment" (ibid, p. 5). Leading out consists of providing *just enough* knowledge about the environment to facilitate knowledge of the coaching environment, supporting effective coach learning opportunities (ibid, p. 4). Knowledge *of* the environment refers to the direct perception of surrounding information (sight, sound, feel and touch; Gibson, 1966) to facilitate transactions with surrounds. This source of knowledge directly regulates how coaches interact with others and is developed through experiential learning under interacting individual, task and environmental constraints. This emergent process allows coaches to "transition to a new state of knowing how to coach better, represented by an enhanced knowledge of the environment" (ibid, p. 3). Both forms of knowledge could be leveraged in coach development to connect experiential coaching practices to relevant theoretical frameworks, which then support further exploration.

When coach education and development are conceived as coach educere (leading out), the process of mentoring shifts from the transmission of knowledge about the environment, to direct experience of knowledge of the coaching environment. An experienced other does not need to already possess the "correct" knowledge to guide another, but rather to lead another out into the world such that the coach can primarily experience things for themselves (Morris et al., 2022). This approach to mentoring could address the previously highlighted shortcomings that exist in current approaches to provide a valuable contribution to support future coach development.

The mentoring relationship

Mentoring can occur through informal observation and interaction with peer coaches or may be formalised through governing body programmes of coach development designed to meet a set of objective outcomes beyond the learning of individual coaches (Sawiuk, Taylor, & Groom, 2018). As an educational approach predicated on learning from experience, the growing application of mentoring to settings of sports coaching perhaps emanates from the ability to situate learning in context (Bloom, 2013). Mentoring appears to be an effective coach learning strategy across multiple contexts and levels (e.g. novice basketball coaches, Koh, Bloom, Fairhurst, Paiement, & Kee, 2014; championship winning coaches; Donoso-Morales, Bloom, & Caron, 2017), with the potential for developing skills and behaviours beyond technical or tactical knowledge. The ability to work with a mentor is highly valued by coaches as a way of learning to manage themselves (e.g. self-regulation, enhancing body language awareness, decision making and problem-solving) and develop various skills (interpersonal, emotional intelligence, personal reflection) which may help them deal with some uncertainties of coaching (Cushion, 2015).

Mentoring cannot act as a "quick fix" intervention because the mentor–mentee relationship evolves over time, continually shaped by layers of influencing factors, as experience and understanding changes (Corsby, Lane, & Spencer, 2022). How individuals perceive their role as a mentor or mentee, organisational structures and historical-cultural constraints, all shape the mentor–mentee relationship (ibid). Therefore, mentoring requires long-term investment (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998). The uncritical application of mentoring to coach development has continued despite this conceptual vagueness (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021), often built upon unchallenged assumptions about what constitutes good coaching (Leeder & Cushion, 2020), without recognising the complexity of coaching practice (Cushion, 2015). To develop understanding of such complexities in coaching, some researchers (e.g. Jones, Edwards, & Viotto Filho, 2016) have sought to move beyond continued assessments of the sequential "models" approach to coaching. This approach promotes coaching as a logical sequence of events in practice that can be compartmentalised into given knowledge systems (e.g. Abraham & Collins, 2011). Coaching is fundamentally intertwined with coach teaching and athlete learning, within given situational constraints (i.e. at the heart of coaching lies the teaching – learning interface), complete with its essential non-routine, problematic and complex characteristics (Jones, 2006). Although many researchers concede that coaching is complex, the appeal remains for adopting the linear operationality of a given "toolkit" and an "effective" practice model (Jones et al., 2016). This linearity in the coaching process permeates through the

coach–learner relationship and the mentor–mentee relationship, so our conceptualisation of education shapes our perception of what good coaching and mentoring looks like.

Mentoring was recently applied within sport coaching programs by Leeder and Sawiuk (2021), inspired by the education literature within sport coaching programs (e.g. Stanulis et al., 2019; Wexler, 2020) and building on earlier work by Jones, Harris, and Miles (2009). They positioned mentoring as an initiative encompassing learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees by breaking down the more traditional hierarchical approach towards mentoring (Langdon, 2014; Trevethan & Sandretto, 2017). Findings identified that a more expansive process also provided mentors with several growth opportunities from their interactions with mentees, extending the "learning territory" which allowed mentors and mentees to embed in their future practice. As such, the complexity of coaching demands a responsive, critical application of mentoring, which does not feature a unidirectional learning journey for just the coach, but a transformative process for mentor and mentee alike. Consequently, we conceptualise the mentoring relationship within the ecological-social anthropological framework of "an experienced other", whose role in educating a coach is one of "leading them out" into the world to directly experience it for themselves, with guidance and support.

Role of the experienced other

Conception of coach education as "leading another out in the world", requires a distinction of the role of the "other". An experienced other in the context of coach development provides "guidance without specification" in " . . . long-term, mentored experience of coaching, guided by a substantive theoretical framework for athlete learning and development" (Wood et al., 2023, p. 15). A person who is more experienced, acting as a mentor on the learning journey, is not a new idea; Vygotsky's (1978) "more knowledgeable other" suggests a similar interaction between learners and teachers in a sociocultural learning context, casting the teacher as someone who helps guide and regulate the amount of support a learner needs. Similarly, interacting with other coaches was emphasised by Werthner and Trudel (2006) in their description of unmediated learning situations, where there is no instructor and the learner takes the initiative and is responsible for choosing what to learn to update their cognitive structures (a network of knowledge (about), feelings or emotions). To distinguish the role of an experienced other compared to these existing conceptualisations, we need to delineate what the "other" knows and does.

A more knowledgeable other may know more *about* an environment, but an experienced other knows more *of* the environment through direct

experience. This is an important distinction as Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the role of social relational interactions to construct knowledge and reproduce behaviour. From an ecological perspective, we do not need to construct knowledge to understand our environment. The information coaches need is readily available in the environment for pick up, but they must learn to pay attention to it (Ingold, 2000; Jacobs & Michaels, 2007). Interacting with an experienced other may seem to share similarities with an unmediated learning situation as defined by Werthner and Trudel (2006), but the intention goes beyond building internal cognitive structures when situated as "leading out". Here, the mentee is not being led into a construction of the mentor's world, but rather out into their own world. Their interactions are not just the abstract and social, but socioenvironmental – an active relational interaction between the experienced other and the coach while attentively dwelling in their coaching environment, As such, the question of how coaches seek an experienced other, suitable to "lead out" with and "dwell in" a coaching landscape remains paramount.

When does mentoring become coach educere?

The line between coach education and coach development is blurred under the definition of coach educere, but there may be a more distinct border between mentoring and coach development. Like some geographical borders, this represents more of a colloquially accepted line in the sand than a formalised structure to adhere to. There are four principles that characterise coach educere through correspondence, adopting a "knowing as we go" ethos, guidance without specification, and paying attention.

Correspondence

According to Ingold (2018), individuals come to know by way of participating *with* the world. A coach who is responsive to the dynamics of their coaching landscape could be considered as engaging in correspondence with their environment, as each part of the coach–environment relationship asks questions of the other. Correspondence for coach educere, therefore, encompasses an experienced other (mentor), a coach and the coaching environment together as a complex system. Woods and Davids (2023) recommend thinking of correspondence "more harmonically, with participants attempting to resonate with one another by casting experiences forward" (p. 9–10). For this correspondence to be functional, a shared model of learning is needed that is congruent with the learning process (e.g. "explore to learn, learn to explore"; Button et al., 2020), to be well aligned with theoretical concepts in ecological dynamics.

Correspondence can be described as a "sharedness" between a coach and a mentor. As the mentor interacts with the daily training environments of the coach, they consider how the approach fits into the shared model of learning and broader coaching environment. The embeddedness of the mentor in the coaching environment allows them to become responsive to the coaching dynamics and constraints, corresponding (responding) with the coach to any issues that arise or innovations they could be pursued. For instance, consider a coach wanting to explore using guided discovery methods with their athletes through the application of questioning rather than prescriptive instructions. There is a possibility that they may be met with initial confusion from the athletes if previous interactions with questioning have been rare. A mentor may act to support the coach in their exploration, such as scaling their approach to start a little smaller, perhaps with "sentence starters" to reduce the burden of asking and answering complex questions.

Correspondence is emergent and cannot be pre-planned, it is difficult to design a formal curriculum that adequately instils coaches with discipline-relevant content for the dynamic environments they coach within. This is why effective coach educere must not be over-constrained by knowledge about coaching predicated on a top-down, abstracted coaching science curricula or putative standard models of effective coaching and mentoring. Rather, gaining rich knowledge of the coaching environment should emerge from a learning experience of being led out into the world. If we cannot predetermine what we must know along the way, then both coach and mentor must adopt a "knowing as we go" ethos to maintain their preferred trajectory.

A 'knowing as we go' ethos

As correspondence is a process continually casting experiences forward, each participant in this relationship can only "know as they go", accepting unpredictability and uncertainty in coaching as they strive towards *knowing how to coach better* with the adaptive and responsive behaviours developed alongside their mentor (Wood et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2020). While a guide may traditionally direct someone *to* a pre-planned destination, the distinction here is that an experienced other is leading the coach *out* into the world, in a direction that emerges when the journey has begun. Learning to traverse a shifting landscape of coach educere does not come from following a predefined map but rather by attentive dwelling in a performance landscape. Coach educere may open up the coach to new opportunities for co-adaptation or innovation, which in turn guides their attention to the landscape in a different way. A mentor may help guide this search,

corresponding in a way that allows the coach to make sense of their surroundings and observations while also being supported by the shared learning model.

Additionally, innovation may open up the coach to sociocultural constraints in the form of systemic resistance and/or tangible animosity for attempting to coach differently to others (Stone et al., 2021). Fighting against such resistance can feel like a waste of energy, depleting the same resource that a coach would need to continue their exploration and learning. This makes coach educere unsustainable in the current traditional system without (re)considering the macro-cultural and environmental constraints that shape sporting organisations and the subsequent learning opportunities made available to coaches (Morganti et al., 2023; O'Sullivan, Woods, Vaughan, & Davids, 2021). For an experienced other, leading a coach out becomes a delicate balance of responding to their need for support and stability by reinforcing the positive impact their current practice has, and destabilising the coach in a way that fosters exploration to continue growing their knowledge (of the environment). Here, the use of "guidance without specification" can promote exploration without pre-determining what a coach should search for.

Guidance without specification

One of the premises of coach educere is a less intrusive pedagogy, or *poor pedagogy* as Masschelein (2010) suggests, which is more concerned with guiding others towards the discovery of things for themselves, rather than with rules, instructions, or defined ways of doing (Otte, Rothwell, & Davids, 2022). Traditionally, coach education is deployed when a coach finds themselves responsible for an athlete who has been deemed "talented" by a national governing body and greater support becomes available, or they are seen to not be coaching in a "predetermined manner" that suits the sociocultural norms of a sport. In sports like athletics and tennis, where a coach may move through a talent pathway with their athlete, governing bodies may dictate who can coach "talented" athletes (and how). This additional scrutiny at new levels of the talent system may be an exhausting burden to the coach, especially if an alternative pedagogy is being used. Guidance without specification can be used to help alleviate this tension and promote coach educere, as an experienced other (coach developer) helps a learner (coach) explore the various features of their surroundings to invite interaction, rather than prescribing what coaching should look like and how it *should* be done. An experienced other here may manipulate elements of a coach's task to "dampen certain invitations to act and amplify others" (Morris et al., 2022, p. 10), by intentionally designing-in challenges for coaches to solve without specifying how to coach. To fully engage with

this learning process, a coach must learn to pay attention to these affordances, which can also be guided by the experienced other.

Paying attention

A key role for a mentor while leading out with a coach is to guide their attention, such that they are presented with opportunities to develop extensive knowledge of relevant affordances in a coaching environment (Wood et al., 2023). A mentor can guide a coach's exploration and discovery through questioning to open the coach up to alternative and/or important affordances when coaching. In this way, a coach's attention is educated towards the changes observed and experienced as they dwell in their environment (Woods et al., 2021). Dwelling in the coaching environment is important for the coach, who is learning to pay attention to information sources that help regulate their behaviour. As Ingold (2000) writes, learning is inseparable from being in a place, so becoming familiar with what a place affords a coach is equally as important for the mentor as it is the coach.

Fine-tuning the perception and action of a coach while guided by a mentor constrains them to "search again" or re-search. To this extent, what is revealed to the coach is discovered directly in the environment and not constructed or transmitted to them. The intention of the mentor is to guide the coach *deeper and deeper into the world* (Ingold, 2000, p. 56). This education of attention results from the direct perception of meaning revealed to the coach as they explore what the environment affords them (Gibson, 1979). Growing familiarity within a place then evolves into enskilment, where learning cannot be separated from doing. The implication is that coaches should be afforded opportunities to act on specific information and affordances of their environment as they emerge so they can learn to actively search for opportunities, and self-regulate their coaching behaviours in response to the dynamic constraints of coaching (Wood et al., 2023).

It is easy for a mentor to derail a coach's self-discovery (and therefore learning) if, for example, they were to impose overly prescriptive or narrow guiding questions. The education of attention is more like a gentle nudge (How might the session look from a different point in the arena?) rather than a prescribed redirection or steering from the back seat (What do you see from the back of the runway?). As the coach becomes accustomed to the need to pay attention and remain open to many possible opportunities for action, a mentor must also pay attention and be equally sensitive to the individual coach's behaviours – so the coach and mentor together enter into correspondence *with* the environment.

Summary

This critical commentary leans heavily on the recent redirection of sport science towards educere to enrich the uncritical application of mentoring in coach education. This paper does not, and cannot, provide a comprehensive guide of how to apply mentoring to coach education. To do so assumes that we can pre-determine what each individual coach needs at any given moment. The distinction here from similar approaches to social learning and mentoring is what we consider distinct forms of knowledge, preferencing knowledge grown through enskilment. We hope this paper serves as a starting point for others, not as a definitive end to the correspondence, but the beginning. By reconceptualising education as educere, we wish to emphasise the importance of knowledge *of* the environment and illustrate how leading out with an experienced other can be achieved. By corresponding with and dwelling in the coach-mentor-environment, a coach can be supported in their search for valuable information to pay attention to. This exploration can be guided by the mentor without specifying what to search for and/or when, allowing the coach to act on affordances as they emerge. We do not present an exhaustive list of how and/or when mentoring becomes coach education, but humbly weave together the threads of contemporary sport science to support the development of sport coaches.

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