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Sports Coach Mentoring – Impacts on the Mentors, not the 'Mentees'. A Case Study of the Active Sussex Coach Support Officers Scheme.

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Abstract

In the field of learning theories associated with coach education, there exists an understanding that the use of informal learning has a greater impact and importance on the development of coaching practice than that of formal coach education (10, 17, 21). Many National Governing Bodies (NGBs), sports providers, and sports clubs have increasingly turned to the use of mentoring as a learning and support strategy for their coaches. There is now much literature supporting the positive effects that mentoring programmes can have on those mentored (2, 8, 33). However, there is to date relatively little literature concerning the effect that the mentoring programmes may have on the mentors themselves.

This study presents data accrued from a collaborative mentoring project developed by the author and Active Sussex, one of the 45 County Sports Partnerships (CSP) in England that act as part of the Sport England delivery system. The key findings from the study are threefold and suggest that 1) formalised mentoring programmes can benefit both the mentee and mentor through shared experience and problem solving; 2) that developing communities of learning for the mentors helps support and contextualise problems with others in similar positions and facilitates time and space to maximise learning through social interaction; and 3) that working together not only helps the coaching practice of the mentors, but likewise can also help with an increase in their professional profile and differences in how external agencies viewed their practice and perceptions of them as 'experts' – because of their involvement in the scheme.

Keywords: Coaching, mentoring, reflection, communities, learning, United Kingdom.

Introduction

In the last 15 years there has been a concerted effort to professionalise a number of industry and service sectors within the UK in terms of their vocational approaches and conduct. Examples of these include the care (34), Further Education (FE) teaching (14, 44) and broader leisure sectors (39, 40). Some of this effort and focus was, no doubt, due to an increasing need to meet the demands placed on these different sectors to meet broader legislation, such as health and safety, childcare, and the implementation of the Criminal Records Bureau checking system. Added to this mix of complex and multidimensional legislative frameworks that altered broader working practice, the notion of employability has also gained political currency within the last 15 years. Briefly, government policy in the UK has for a period of time insisted upon a more skill based economy, one that positions the idea of employer engagement within the decision making process for developing professional standards for different job sectors (12). In sum then, there is now a greater awareness of the need for professional development, irrespective of profession or work sector in the UK.

More specifically within the context of UK sports coaching, over the last 15 years the coaching landscape has been shaped by a series of papers and strategies, mirroring the increases in professionalism to which other sectors have been subjected. Perhaps most importantly, the Coaching Task Force Report outlined a rationale for change and a plan for the future of coaching within the UK (13). The report saw coach development in the UK as variable in quality and quantity, behind international competitors, tremendously reliant on a voluntary workforce, having a low social status, and in effect – having no coherent or standardised coach education system. Two of the most important recommendations that the report outlined were the introduction of a generic five level coaching qualification, across sports, and the creation of a number of regional Coach Development Officers aligned to the County Sports Partnership Network (CSPN). Both of these recommendations are still in action today, albeit that the five stage coaching model was superseded by the four stage United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC) model. Broadly, the purpose of the UKCC is to allow different sports to be acknowledged with the same qualifications framework, thus ensuring both quality and standardisation. Currently, it is probably not unreasonable to say that the UKCC has largely shaped contemporary approaches to coaching practice. The UKCC model complements National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and National Occupational Standards (NOS) competency based criteria, and is effectively an endorsement process that quality assures NGB coaching awards and sets out criteria that assists with standardisation and coherency (10, 42).

And in the real world of coaching, one that encompasses the entire spectrum of grass roots to performance, what all of this does is reflect a wider, government led, vision of a modernised coaching force, irrespective of paid status. Yet all of this might lead, or at the least contribute to, what might be understood as the increased pressures that coaches across sports now operate under. In brief, with the professionalisation of coaches over the last 15 years it is now incumbent upon the coaches to improve their practice due to the increasing nature of checks, minimum qualifications, and evidence of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that coaches find themselves under (30, 36). And to be

sure, this is reflective in both the paid and voluntary ranks, with career (irrespective of monetary remuneration) advancement or even retention oftentimes reliant on CPD and the coaches 'proving' themselves at different levels, times, and through different contexts in order to either continue to operate or progress in some form.

Coach learning

Since the aforementioned attempt to professionalize coaching practice in the UK coach learning, in general, and coach development, in particular, have been, acknowledged as a complex process and are still areas of contention. Much of the existing research that is related to or conducted on coach learning is driven by the notions of formal, informal, and non-formal methods of learning (10). The first, formal coach education, is principally concerned with the delivery of national governing body awards and official accreditation. As such, this method and source of learning is structured, organized, accredited, assessed, and directed. In contrast, informal coach learning is self-directed, and uses a range of sources. Accordingly, this type of learning is relatively unstructured, non-accredited and non-assessed. The last learning source, non-formal coach learning, incorporates a variety of methods such as workshops, small courses and general continuous professional development (CPD). By nature, much of this takes place outside of governing body systems, and whilst it can indeed be structured and mediated, it is oftentimes self-directed.

But it is informal learning, which sits outside of qualifications, vocational pathways, workshops, and short courses, that is seen as the best way of facilitating deeper learning. Oftentimes this is achieved through a more collaborative, social process of groups sharing experiences and best practice. This form of thinking and type of learning is especially true for the idea of coach mentoring, a practice that sees at its heart the process of guiding and formative, advisory support. Whilst it is difficult to accurately define the mentoring process as it encapsulates people, time, a process, and bridges disciplines (i.e. business, sports, and other professions) and social and psychological science, it can be explained in some generally agreed terms. These terms outline the fact that mentoring is a process that involves the more experienced, knowledgeable mentor to assist and support the less experienced mentee in developing their professional practice (20). In most studies, the current trend in mentoring is to compare the efforts and improvement of the mentees pre and post intervention. In this way, differences between the two periods can be seen to emerge as they are often characterised as improvements in professional practice, personal satisfaction, and developing competencies.

Examples of research in this area include the study of 21 Canadian expert team coaches undertaken by Bloom et al. (20). Here, they found that all of the coaches had gained valuable knowledge through what they recognised as informal mentoring arrangements in their coaching journey; from being mentored as athletes and then coaches and then mentoring athletes and coaches themselves once they had achieved a certain level of expertise. Another example of how mentoring can help can be seen in North's (30) study, within the UK, of 46 coaches who received Coach Development Officer (CDO) North outlined how the coaches felt that support was greatly appreciated, in particular the opportunity to have a critical friend and an informal mentor. And Jones et al. (22) in a review of the literature pertaining to mentoring in sports coaching, stated that when describing mentoring as 'learning from more senior others' (p.275) then the evidence

strongly supported the use of mentoring to develop coaches' professional practice and expertise, albeit acknowledging that there was still then a lack of significant research available specific to sports mentoring in the UK context.

Overall, much of the research surrounding the idea of coach mentoring relies on notions of collectivity and communal practice (17, 35). A key influence here, for example, is the work of Lave and Wenger (24), whose community of practice (CoP) framework signifies a triple layered model of reflection and support, moving from self-reflection to the use of a critical friend, and culminating in potential communities of learning. Based on the premise that learning is best facilitated through working with others, the CoP proposes that learning will take place in appropriate groups and that this is achieved through interaction and shared experiences. To a large extent then, the mentor-mentee relationship is based upon an exchange of ideas and information. And the assumption is that the mentee can, in simple terms, access a more experienced resource (the mentor), in order to construct new knowledge, understanding, and improved professional practice. In sum, the mentee is the recipient of professional and social support; and the process of mentoring itself is strongly linked with increases in critical reflection (19).

So whilst a review of literature seems to suggest that there are a range of benefits for developing coaches to work with a more experienced coach in some form of mentoring system, either formally or informally, there remains the question of whether this understanding of mentoring can truly inform how we understand the process as an entirety. By analysing the construction and implementation of many of the current research designs it is evident that they place the burden of where to measure improvement on the mentees themselves, and that it could be seen as a straightforward, one-way beneficiary relationship (18). Additionally, much of the research that compares mentor interventions has also advocated best practice which is again focused on processes that can potentially improve the mentees' knowledge and experience. Thus, it is probably fair to say that research focusing on mentoring in sports coaching can be summarised by an overemphasis, both in available research and broader recommendations, on how those 'mentored' can be helped – instead of all of those involved in the process.

In light of this, this research looks to outline the findings (and the benefits of their roles) generated from two years of meetings that six coaches, acting as mentors, in the Active Sussex Coach Support Officer scheme undertook as part of their role. In brief then, the issue is not simply whether acting as a mentor can be viewed as contributing to the construction and development of coaching knowledge. Rather, the research seeks to catalogue the benefits that were accrued through a process that deliberately involved what could be called a mentor 'support group', one that allowed coach mentors from different sporting disciplines to exchange ideas and give assistance to one another.

The CSO scheme

The Coach Support Officer (CSO) scheme came about as a result of a piece of research undertaken by the author for Active Sussex in 2012/13 (5). The research drew upon the experiences and thoughts of a number of recipients of a Coach Bursary programme that operated between 2011 and 2014. Preliminary findings showed that all coaches

interviewed felt that a coach mentoring strategy, led by the CSP would be highly beneficial in developing a more effective coaching workforce. Given this, planning started on county wide mentoring scheme supporting Sportivate projects.

Six highly experienced coaches were recruited to the CSO roles. A key point to the recruitment process was that they were 'practitioners', and that they understood, and all agreed upon, the importance and idea of participation, community, and youth sport – not necessarily performance sport. It is worth mentioning here that the idea of what a sports coach is was not led by what is traditionally seen as a technical framework that is supported and driven by the discipline of sports science (23, 45, 29, 4) Rather, as might be expected of coaches with experience of community and participation sport, the CSO's worked in a number of fields and had experience of various community sport initiatives. In terms of brief biographical details, all of the coaches worked in a full time capacity in coaching/education related roles. One worked for a football community programme, with an emphasis on multi-sports and disability sports. Two coaches worked for two different local authorities as sports coaches and development officers. Whilst both coaches' main sport experience was football (as they were both football coaches in their 'spare' time), they had significant experience of multi-sport programmes. One coach worked as a golf professional alongside an education/development programme. another coach worked as a coach tutor for two different sports (sailing and netball), and the other coach was a Physical Education teacher by day and a field hockey coach outside of working hours. All of the coaches had significant multi-sport experience spanning a decade or more.

After the CSO's were recruited the 'training' commenced in February 2013. This February start allowed all CSO's to be allocated a number of Sportivate 2012-13 first quarter projects. Started in 2011 and with funding assured until at least 2017, Sportivate is a Lottery funded project (overseen by Sport England) that forms part of the London 2012 Olympic Legacy and looks to offer new and exciting sport activities for young people aged 14-25. The projects are managed and distributed by the county sports partnership network, and individual projects are typically run over 6-8 week coaching blocks. The way CSOs were allocated and assigned to a cross-section of projects was based on the following: Sportivate criteria (for example if there was a female, disability or specific geographical focus for that round), new projects starting that needed additional support, projects that perhaps needed to comply with what might be termed quality assurance principles, and lastly, if a project had identified the CSO as a support need in their Sportivate application. After this allocation, each CSO contacted and met with the individual project leads and undertook a number of site visits from which feedback was generated and disseminated.

The general task for the CSO's when supporting projects was to act in a fashion that principally identified the coach needs and requirements for community and participation coaching (particularly in terms of youth, disability, and young adult participation), and secondarily, to advise the projects in terms of delivery, execution, and occasionally helping establish them. The first task, identifying coach requirements, sought to emphasise the needs for community coaches employed by the Sportivate projects to promote such core coaching skills as communication, practical delivery, and interpersonal skills necessary to ensure engagement – something very important given the nature of the Sportivate projects.

The second task, project delivery support, was in fact one that developed more as the CSO scheme evolved. Occasionally this meant helping coaches or project leads in partnership work, or advertising, for example.

The CSO's then continued to meet as a group on a regular basis, typically every three months, to ensure that consistent monitoring and evaluation of the projects they were supervising had taken place. Additionally, the CSO's were supported by a series of visits, in effect a standardisation process, from Anthony Statham (project lead) and the author of this paper which ensured all CSO's were giving comparable feedback through both the first and second Sportivate quarters. The meetings also developed into an opportunity to act, alongside administrative responsibilities and strategic planning, as an action learning set where the CSO's could discuss any coaching related issues.

At time of writing (mid 2017), the CSO scheme was still in operation and supporting a percentage of Sportivate projects within Sussex. The CSO team continue to meet regularly, occasionally observe each other, and in general look to support their CSO work as well as their other sports coaching, administrative, and development responsibilities (all of the CSO's are active coaches and sports facilitators). The scheme had also grown in that the CSO's have now been allocated to a percentage of new Satellite clubs – expanding the potential reach of their expertise and allowing more projects and sports clubs the ability to gain supportive feedback.

Moreover, the CSO scheme was highlighted at the October 2014 CSP Coaching Conference and met with considerable praise. Indeed, following this, a number of CSPs looked at starting similar projects as part of their 2014-16 delivery plans and as of late 2016, 12 CSPs had implemented similar schemes. To summarise, the scheme has been met with a broad agreement that it is a good idea and, furthermore, has led to a number of other CSP's looking closely at the scheme.

Methods

Briefly, a note must be made here as to the justification of the methods for the study. By its very nature, this is a case study that involved reflecting upon the thoughts and experiences of six coach mentors during eight meetings over a two and a half year period who consented to participate in the programme and study. In acknowledging this, and recognising that previous coach learning, development, and practice literature has been based on the acquisition of their perceptions, beliefs and motivations (7, 25, 23), the method was framed by a qualitative, interpretive epistemological approach (41). This approach used an inductive content analysis of various meeting notes and conversations, which allowed organised themes to emerge from the combined data. The conversations were recorded verbatim, and once both the meeting notes and conversations were completely transcribed, each transcript was read repeatedly in order that they could become familiar to the researcher (31). The researcher then looked for recurring patterns and themes which could be identified within meaningful units (11), and in order to make sense and give meaning to the data, the transcripts were decoded and categorised (27). Thematic analysis was then used and this allowed the data to be structured and directed into sections that were considered to represent key themes and patterns (1). This was achieved through a process of repeatedly comparing all of the text and data, both between

and across them, and through the identification of key words, responses and phrases that kept appearing across the interview. The three main sections that were considered to represent key themes and patterns were, respectively: 'Shared experiences and collective understandings', 'Time – away from others' and 'Mentor education – 'career' guidance and support'.

Results/Discussion

As stated above analysis of the results revealed three general themes relating to the mentors' individual and shared experiences, all of which will now be outlined in more detail. The findings are presented in anonymised fashion, with the CSO's being given numbers to differentiate between them.

'Time – away from others'

> Allows me the opportunity to talk out of work regarding things that I know, like, and understand, which is something that I really, really enjoy. And it certainly gets me off of the sports pitch which is a great thing! (CSO 4, 15/01/2015).

> Talking to everyone is great – taking bits and ideas from how everyone is doing their projects and their own coaching. You then get the chance to start thinking about what it is that you might do, instead of thinking about the normal things in work that you have to do. (CSO 5, 22/05/2014).

Often, the CSO's ability to really think about things related to their coaching was discussed in terms of time away from others; time that allowed the CSO's to put their own interests and coaching practice at the forefront of their thoughts, and to allow them the confidence to speak with others as well. Overall, what was apparent from the data was that the CSOs found themselves reflecting on their own practice far more easily when given the chance to do this with others outside of their working environment:

As this CSO reported:

> Just having reflection and conversations in this time at the meetings gives me an a lot of questions to reflect on my own practice – it allows me to be taken out of 'normal sports' mode and gives me confidence to be a CSO. (CSO 2, 15/01/2015).

This lack of opportunity to really delve into the problems that they encountered, both in their CSO roles and in their coaching related roles, meant that the group as a whole was seen to serve as a supportive community. One CSO realised that in order to improve, it was essential to "invest time into exploring a new/different sports and the club organisations that deliver the projects" (CSO 1, 15/01/2015), and all of the CSO's were in agreement that it was the time outside of work that the group sessions facilitated that helped them improve:

> It's the opportunity to access high level thinking and critical analysis outside of 'work' in the group sessions – it's really about having time and managing our understanding outside of what are really are own 'boxes' and out of context learning. (CSO 4, 22/06/2014).

One CSO summed up their time together as an opportunity to be with liked-minded people, an opportunity then that was:

> Really helpful, it really is just a time to think through things and do and talk about what we are passionate about. You don't always get that opportunity at work, either because others aren't as interested, or you're just too busy. (CSO 6, 15/01/2015).

One of the other CSO's was very much in agreement with these comments stating that it was an opportunity to get:

> Out of the normal environment and the normal 'stuff' that we've all got going on. Because of the trust we've developed it gives us all a chance to talk about other things, problem solve, and share our ideas through actually talking. (CSO 2, 30/04/2015).

In fact, this theme was recognisable throughout all of the coaches' reflections and comments. The general understanding that was inferred from the comments was that the idea of "time to reflect and impact on own and others' coaching" (CSO 1, 30/04/2015) and "Professional practice – learning through collaboration – chatting to others and reflecting" (CSO 5, 15/01/2015) underpinned how important a designated time was to reflect and work with others. Interestingly, the time given to these meetings also expanded to outside of the specific meetings times, as one CSO explained "It's not just this time, on the drive home I get to think through where I am and what I am doing" (CSO1, 18/08/2015).

These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests that longer term professional and personal development and working practices can be enhanced through the use of reflective practice (23, 6). And in simple terms, that reflection is a process and that any sustained critical inquiry within the reflective process, typically of experience (what happened, what contributed, the context) and then reflection, needs to take place outside of what actually happened. However, here is it also evident that the CSO's felt that the reflection that they could undertake in the meetings was more guided and articulated by critically assessing their own behaviour and practice in the company of those with similar professional responsibilities and action. As one CSO said, "here, two brains are better than one, not only when reflecting with coaches on the projects we work with, but also here when we meet as CSO's to discuss our progress" (CSO 5, 15/01/2015).

'Shared experiences and collective understanding'

Whilst the previous theme, in part, focused on the concept of time outside of their normal working and coaching lives, this theme encapsulates what was seen as "shared experiences" and how these were explained by being with others who experienced similar problems, what was also apparent was that the sharing extended, significantly in the eyes of the coaches, to ideas of a "supportive environment". One of the key elements that kept appearing over the full course of the two years of group meetings was just how much the coaches enjoyed working with the rest of their group. More specifically, they enjoyed the fact that they were working with people from other sports backgrounds to their own, yet furthermore felt that they could draw upon what were common – across many sports and coaching in particular – approaches to non-specific sport problems. In fact, the CSO's all agreed that one of the main strengths of working with others from different backgrounds was that it could enable them to be better equipped to deal with a broader range of coaching questions and problem solving relative to coaching:

> There's no question, the development of my own skills has been greatly enhanced by working with people from various sports that I would not really be involved in. I'd say overall that having a group of people who have the same passion of sport and the sharing of knowledge has really benefitted my skills, most likely because sharing of good practice is a great resource and increases my knowledge of coach strategies. (CSO 1, 06/01/2014).

Indeed, the evidence points to how many of the coaches further thought that it was the actual application and understanding of what others did that could improve their own practice. One CSO stated that whilst is was a fantastic "Opportunity to see and experience different sports and different coaches and their individual approaches" and "interesting to recognise different levels of expertise and knowledge within coaches and how they practically apply it", it was also important to "identify other practices, through the other coaches, for my own coaching and to be able to recognise potential pitfalls and areas for improvement" (CSO 3, 22/05/2014).

Another CSO also identified the importance of learning from the people he shared the CSO role with, his quote summarising what all of the coaches felt in terms of working outside of their normal environs:

> Our group sessions are great for understanding how and what other CSO's are doing as well as being able to step outside of own insular practices/thoughts – they are great for out of context learning and understanding more about coaching approaches. (CSO 2, 06/01/2014).

These findings are in agreement with the general premise of current literature that suggests that in the domain of adult learning it is informal learning that has a greater impact and importance on the development of coaching practice than that of other forms (21, 17, 10). However, what was also very apparent in this theme was the fact that 'shared experiences' extended to the concept of time shared with others who experienced similar problems. The CSO's in this case study appeared to be highlighting this as a particular strength of meeting with the others on a regular basis:

> It's really incredibly helpful for me to meet up just to listen to the bureaucratic process that all of you guys also need to go through. When this happens I can sit back and think "thank god it's not just me! (CSO 5, 15/01/2015).

In fact, often, the main strength of the CSO scheme was discussed in terms of learning in an environment that was supportive, supportive in the sense that it involved like-minded people, and supportive in the sense that it was outside of work and the particular pressures that could bring. As one CSO described it,

> It's just a great group, and being in this group helps me identify other practices for my own coaching. It also allows me to recognise some of my own potential shortcomings and map out how I can address areas for improvement. (CSO 1, 06/01/2014).

The need for this support may have much to do with what many of the CSOs stated as a lack of real opportunities to discuss wider sports problems. As an example, one CSO, who works full time in a coaching related role, discusses this idea:

> I get the opportunity to take some of the concepts back into my 'own' sport environment, here I get to benefit from a wide experience of coaches and sport that helps me identify personal practice and pitfalls, and importantly, increases my understanding of the motivations behind mentoring and allows me to take this back into my own sport context. (CSO 3, 22/05/2014).

Similarly, another CSO found the group sessions quite enlightening, and saw them as an opportunity to really benefit from working with others and using their expertise in areas that they were not as familiar with:

> You know, whilst the idea of play is universal – it's the different ways that we can facilitate, plan, and how we coach alongside this that helps/ seeing other sport specific approaches and different coaching approaches helps me understand more about other sports, projects, and pathways. Being with others helps me decontextualise my own theories and coaching approaches. (CSO 2, 06/01/2014).

These findings broadly reflect and can be explained in two ways. Firstly, thorough the role of Action Learning. Briefly, Action Learning focuses on the point between reflection and action by more formally structuring and directing reflection, and critically, using others to help support any individuals' mindful consideration and decision making (28, 32). Moreover, the role and nature of Action Sets, whereby small groups get together (on a regular basis) to discuss issues of personal or mutual importance, is based upon the premise that it is the practitioners themselves who are best placed to improve their own knowledge as opposed to 'experts'. Secondly, that there was an emerging CoP and that facilitating more dynamic, collaborative, and cooperative processes, particularly within this professional context, supported the development of the CSO's. By its very nature, informal coach education rejects any formality and structured approach and this is recognised by literature and advocates of CoP type learning (24, 9). But what is of note here are two things, a) that it seems that using a connective model of learning supports a process of qualified participation, and b) it is evident that there is a an explicit acknowledgement by the CSO's of how their fellow practitioners help a great deal in their learning and development.

'Mentor education – 'career' guidance and support'

Whilst the themes above have concentrated on the opportunity that was afforded to the CSO's in terms of reflective practice and benefiting from working with others in a similar professional field, this last theme deals with the more specific nature of how some of their improvement as practitioners was evidenced. As stated previously, there is minimal empirical evidence on the impact that mentoring schemes can have on the improvement of the mentors themselves, as opposed to the developing talent of the mentees. However all six CSO's in this study identified the scheme as having played a part in leading to appreciable changes in their coaching practice, and for the most part, in their professional roles outside of the CSO scheme.

> You know, having this position has actually helped draw down funding for an additional mentoring course from work. They feel that I am now more of an expert in mentoring because of being a CSO, and are actively encouraging me to use these skills and principles in work. (CSO 4, 15/01/2015).

Similarly, four of the other CSOs were also now mentoring more formally in either their

work positions or other external coaching positions. One, for example, is now helping their NGB in mentoring coaches in the region, and stated that the CSO scheme had improved their "personal development as a mentor, in particular when guiding other coaches in my sport" (CSO 1, 19/05/2014). Another CSO also, within the time period of this study and as a direct consequence of their CSO role, had started mentoring as part of a new sports role in terms of coaching and quality assurance – a significant increase in responsibility and one that reflected an elevation in their managerial role. The fifth CSO who was now using mentoring was, alongside their full time sports role, also assisting student coaches in their development and understanding of coaching practice. And the one CSO who was not using mentoring as a working practice outside of their CSO role was still using mentoring skills for their coaching itself, but in a less formal manner, stating that the CSO scheme had helped him in "my development as a coach of coaches" and "connecting and supporting coaches in his sport's region" (CSO 3, 15/01/2015).

Moreover, the study showed how the coaches also valued the support and expertise afforded by the others in the group, and actively sought to goal-set and review progress as a group in order to facilitate their development. One CSO, for instance, stated that the group meetings were "a new opportunity to expand mine and others' coaching experience!" (CSO 4, 06/01/2014), and similarly, another CSO mentioned when asked about how they approached bringing questions to set meetings, that "I wanted to speak to you guys before I decided how to approach a problem" (CSO 6, 15/01/2015). And one CSO's remarks summarised the thoughts of all of the CSO's with their comment that the group had a "Feeling that a development of credibility has taken place and we are developing a community of practice" (CSO 2, 19/05/2014).

In the same vein, one of the CSOs explained in more detail how they felt meeting as a group positively affected all of them:

> We can ask if it's easy to understand a coach's motivation – is this a journey down a well-trodden road and these Sportivate projects are just another source of funding along with some hoops to jump through? Or can we use this to develop our own coaching experience? I think that we are now creating a community that has benefits for all of us as members. (CSO 3, 22/05/2014).

The importance placed on working as a community directly influenced some of the CSO's appreciation of the set meetings. Two of the CSO's explained how the constraints of working independently and keeping up to date with coaching practice were difficult, but made easier in the group.

> But it's easier if you're supporting each other through collaboration. Simply, two people may be able to solve a problem that one person cannot. This is not only true when reflecting with coaches on projects, but also when we are getting together as CSO's. (CSO 4, 19/05/2014).

> I still feel that this is a great window and opportunity for us. We've spent nearly two hours just reflecting and working together as a whole group. This shows how valuable that this time is becoming to all of us. (CSO 5, 15/01/2015).

These findings can be interpreted in two ways. The first, through what can be seen as a growing sense of professional credibility in their wider coaching practice, something

facilitated through being a CSO. It is well worth repeating here that working as a CSO was mostly recognised as something with significant added value by the external organisations the CSO's worked with. Using the concept of employability can help here, for whilst it is a relatively fluid term and one that is beholden to the laws of supply and demand, perhaps more importantly is that many interpretations of employability are based on gaining, maintaining, and transferring employment (26, 16). Given this, a slightly more nuanced view of how one can improve employability through not just fulfilling the particular demands of job roles but instead seeing how workers can make themselves stand out against others in a hierarchy of job seekers (3), demonstrates how being involved in a nationally recognised scheme run by a county sports partnership might well have helped the shift in job or coaching related roles that the CSO's experienced. The second was that the CSO's had grown the scheme, in a somewhat organic fashion, and created their own community of learning. This idea of a community of practice framework was indeed something referred to quite specifically at times. The findings showed how the development of trust, and an awareness of how each of them could use the others as critical friends, built onto what we can see as an emerging support system that at its base allowed time to reflect, in its middle had peer to peer support, and at the top a real community of learning that allowed interaction.

Conclusions

Many of the ideas surrounding CPD within the context of coach education and learning are based on the assumption that an increased knowledge base, in tandem with time allocated to developing individual practice, is dependent upon two things. Firstly, that those undertaking CPD do so in a fashion that befits their preferred style of learning, but also secondly, that whatever manner in which people may well be able to learn is one that is productive and best facilitates knowledge and skills – something that this paper suggests is more readily undertaken through sharing with other members of a similar workforce. This paper has outlined how within mentoring programmes it is not just the mentees that can benefit, rather given the correct framework in which to share ideas and support one another, the mentors themselves can engage in meaningful professional development. This research then is illustrative of the benefits that support groups can facilitate by exchanging ideas, expertise, and both practical and emotional assistance. Moreover, as theme C has demonstrated, the guidance given by others alongside a wider recognition – by work colleagues, otter professionals, and external agencies – of the roles that mentors have undertaken in this scheme, can actually contribute to a development of their careers.

Applications in Sport

Whilst this paper has presented findings that supports the process of group learning by demonstrating how it is the use of reflective practice and Action Sets that can best manage this, what is also evident is that any time a programme or system is set up to facilitate group learning, it needs time and a process of embedding in order to allow the members of groups to organically grow their own community of learning. In short, trust and social interaction are not elements that can be immediately developed. Of particular interest to those who follow the lead of UK Coaching (previously scUK), is that these methods of professional development match up well with the fourth objective of scUK's (2013) Excellent Coaching Every Time for Everyone: Coach Education and Development Strategy

which advocates a "needs-led approach to delivery" and "the development of reflective skills and understanding self" (p.14) for coaches. However, what must be remembered is that these ideas, and this includes the manner in which the mentors increased their professional standing, only allow for a preliminary explanation and it is hoped that future exploration may contribute to a broader understanding of communities of learning for coach mentors.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study expands not only the lack of research on the manner in which mentors can benefit in terms of professional practice from structured programmes of support, but also the fact that this support can also develop professional roles, profile, credibility, and opportunities. It is to be hoped that these findings and the manner in which the programme took place might be looked at more closely by other researchers, practitioners and disciplines, such as the health, care, and education sectors.

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