Group-Game Engineering: A Mini-Review of How Leadership, Meaningful Activity, and Focusing On Inclusivity Can Support Community Sport Coaching Practice

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Article Info

Abstract

Contrary to beliefs that sport coaching is mainly focused on the development of physical ability, skills, and tactical management within the context of performance sport, the role and nature of community sports coaches is more aligned with efforts to respond to various social policy objectives. This being so, community sport coaches need to respond, react, and deliver sessions more aligned with objectives and aims that are predicated upon more personal, individual levels related to psychosocial development and behavioural improvement. However, there is comparably (to traditional, performance sport coaching), more limited evidence outlining and/or extolling possible best practice within the community sport coaching field. This mini-review provides a short overview of the distinctive and complex nature within which community sport coaching operates, and then outlines the findings, and corresponding guidelines, of the author's previous work related to best practice in the context.

Keywords: Positive Behaviours; Generativity; Reflexivity; Community Sport

Introduction

The influence and role of sport coaches within community development matters is now more widely recognised and an emerging evidence base continues to build. This is via the manner in which their professional community and individual coaches, oftentimes act as integral cogs to effect social transformation, and support and produce a range of social outcomes within the context of community programmes. Much of the premise for the work of community sports coaches in facilitating positive behavioural effects rests on the assumption that the coaches can act as agents of social change, and identify and support various issues that young people may present. In all then, the literature purports, although rudimentary in fashion, that positive interactions with people can lead to wider solutions and integration [1-4]. Perhaps principally, the use of social capital and positive youth development (PYD) can help explain the benefits of groups (for instance, coaches and participants) working together. Social capital, a principle that outlines how 'social wealth' can be constructed and measured in much the same manner as physical capital [5-7]. Can help explain, illustrate, and conceptualise how some can meet, develop, and keep friends – with, critically, a raft of potential benefits accrued from stronger social systems. With PYD, there are points of convergence with social capital in terms of the underlying approach of increasing the scale and frequency of human interactions. The divergence, however, is that the concept is more based in the paradigm of positive psychology, and particularly in the sense that

young peoples' positive dispositions (i.e., motivation, resilience) can be intentionally supported [8]. This is by first, understanding young people as resources to be developed, and second, also recognising them as individual agents (although ones that need support and direction at times). Sport, as a process, institution, and series of activities, is seen as an excellent vehicle within which challenges can take place, and where (hopefully with willing engagement also less of an issue) within the context of parameters and rules, young people can meet others, assert some agency and ownership, and grow and develop within a (potentially) controlled environment. Whilst acknowledging how the use of coaches in any direct effectiveness of sports-based interventions is seen to be ultimately reliant on the idea of positive relationships (whilst maintaining boundaries) and seeing coaches as agents of social change [i.e. 9-10], there are also, at least in theory, schemas and examples of deliberate programming, design, and improving general methods that can be followed alongside prioritising positive interactions. This kind of best practice for youth sport development programmes and embedding quality provision can be seen through the work of, for example, Cronin and Armour [11] and Super et al. [12], who identify how informal, fun, yet sufficiently challenging activities (alongside proactive approaches to developing relationships) are significantly helpful in contributing to positive environments. Moreover, the work of Martinek and Hellison [13], Bradbury and Kay [14], and the author [15], for instance, illustrate the way in which programme participants can be empowered through identifying challenging,

yet satisfying, roles and incrementally entrusting different task responsibilities for them. There remains, nevertheless, a need for further clarifying and adding to the research base related to programme design for collective community sport coaching action and practice. This is in part to deproblematise broader issues of hard to follow advice or frameworks, and find and promote easy to follow guidelines and understanding of how to develop solutions. This mini-review now presents the findings from one of the author's previously published articles/papers [16] that focused on sharing the results, and subsequent guidelines, for community sport coaches of an active research project with longstanding community sport coach professionals.

Discussion

The article, Leadership, Bridging, and Group-Game Engineering: Guidelines for Community Sport Coaches [16], presented an overview of the experiences, perceived competencies, and work-based practice of 13 highly experienced community sport coaches (minimum 3 years' experience of full-time equivalent community sport coaching). The data was collected through interviews, and aligned to an action research stance that sought to bridge the author's previous professional background (in youth work/community coaching) and provide continuing professional contact and ideas of practice with the research participants [17]. From this, the following four guidelines outlined below were created. The first recommended practice was to Establish Common Ground, and ask coaches to meaningfully consider, understand, and ultimately manage any initial differences evident within the coach-participant dynamic. The second specific principle was an explicit edict for coaches to Develop Relationships with their participants, and place a particular emphasis on cultivating positive interactions and supportive interrelationships between coaches and participants. The third guideline was to Prioritize Inclusivity (Through Boundaries and Through Game/Activity Management), and this edict sought to establish notions of equality and fairness for all uppermost in the minds, and practice, of coaches. Just as importantly, and considering the context of best practice, this guideline recommended using adapted games in order to ensure meaningful participation for all, and specifically outlined how rule modifications could be used to foster greater teamwork, support systems, and positive interactions and behaviours of the participants. Critically here, the notion of 'winning' was not necessarily an outcome associated with the demands and context of community sport, nor the motivations of participants and as such was understated or avoided altogether as a specific aim. The last guideline/recommended practice was for coaches to Highlight Meaningful Activity and Contribution to Games for All Participants. Here, the recommendation was for coaches to place the developmental needs of the participants as essential, through providing activities that specifically sought to ensure that they – by necessity of the practice environment and session aims and outcomes – would/could develop confidence and an understanding of positive behaviours. In sum, this guideline sought to establish

the use of leadership principles and traits for both coaches and, when possible, participants. Overall, the recommendations/guidelines provided an aspirational framework, but one that specifically highlighted and emphasised the use of fun activities, and encouraged the use of productive sessions and aims that emphasised fun and inclusivity. These guidelines, in some sense, effectively adapted, extended, and placed in the particular context of community sport, Burton, Gillham, and Hammermeister's [18] concept of Competitive Engineering within session management. Whilst Burton et al.'s [18] concept sought to manage competitive environments through four athlete engagement goals (respectively, (a) increase action and scoring, (b) create extensive personal involvement, (c) keep scores close, and (d) promote positive social relationships), these were within a more traditional, performance relate context. However, the four guidelines from Leadership, Bridging, and Group-Game Engineering: Guidelines for Community Sport Coaches [16], whilst fundamentally also seeking to encourage coaches to meaningfully adapt (in a reflexive fashion) their games and activities to ensure more equality - more specifically considered the well-being and development of the participants within the community sport setting.

Conclusion

The intention of the article/paper [16], was not to critique or authoritatively explore the benefits of providing sport within the community context, it was more to establish a number of skills, guiding principles, and best practice necessary to coach within the context. While the article may have generated the four aforementioned guidelines, it is also important to note that they are not considered an exhaustive schema that community sport coaches have to follow. Instead, whilst admittedly looking to underpin coaching knowledge and assets of available resources, ideas, and applications, the article/paper perhaps most importantly seeks to encourage support and well-being, mirroring in part an Eriksonian approach [19-20] and the principle of generativity. The caveat here is that any potential shortcomings in terms of not fully understanding context, motivations, and recognised manners in which participants in community sport projects can be inspired and supported to change, are implicitly laid out in the guidelines. Clearly, there is still a need for a wider, more empirically informed research base, and greater application, resource and efforts for proper training and supervision, but the paper's schema lends itself to a ready route into non-performance, non-traditional, community (at times in more austere, challenging environments) sport coaching and encourages effective conceptualisation of programme aims and session details for this context.

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