A Premier League Football in the Community Programme's 'New' Coaches and Support Systems: Practitioner Reflections

Abstract:

In the UK, many sport coaching career paths are considered to be focused on skills development, competence, and leadership within the context of performance. However, sport coaching also sits substantially within the community and youth sectors, where sport is seen to facilitate various social policy issues. Aligning non-performance related coaching contexts to existing formal qualifications schemes is problematic, given they frequently emphasise athlete and team performance. Whilst an emerging base of studies examining community sports coaching exists, further insight and perspectives of *in-situ* learning and coach support in this context is needed.

Using observations, evaluation, and feedback centred on practitioner competence and confidence, and conducted over a two-year period with 13 new community/grassroots sports coaches working with Albion in the Community (AITC – the official charity of Brighton and Hove Albion Football Club), we present some of the key findings and principles that we believe underlined their practice. These principles related to how, despite the majority being appropriately qualified at NGB level 2, they generally needed additional support and expertise for their specific (community) operational environment in terms of outcomes, practice design, and challenging what was seen as a focus on providing competitive (team) environments above individual player development.

Keywords: Mentoring, Coach Development, Community Coaching, Grassroots sport, Real-World Learning.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years in the UK, a number of work-place environments, occupations, and skills sectors have become increasingly professionalised. Sport coaching, for instance, has benefited from the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC) system (one that oversees assistant to master roles within coaching and is aligned to many NGB coaching awards) that oversaw much coach education over this time period[1]. However, whilst there a number of advantages related to the use and promotion of NGB type courses and qualifications (for instance, meeting minimum standards of deployment and professional requirements), there remain questions related to the extent to which they continue to promote what can be seen as the more performance related elements of coaching (i.e. skill acquisition, biomechanics, and physiology) that persist (Author, 2016/18a Lyle, 2002; Meyers, 2006), and/or more inflexible, instrumental approaches to learning that can stifle creativity and adhere to more rigid, competency-based outcomes (Cushion et al., 2021; Dempsey et al., 2020)**.**

These questions are inevitably drawn from the consensus that sport coaching operates throughout a diverse range, one not constrained to performance characteristics only. Indeed, whilst much literature outlines the term sport coaching through the lens of preparation, competition, and improving performance within the context of sport competition or skills (Gordon, 2009; Lyle, 2002; Martens, 2004), a growing body of work and policy focuses on a wider perspective of coaching that extends beyond this. In fact, it is generally agreed that outside of the sports pitch, court, or field, the use of sport to facilitate and/or expedite wider social policy objectives (such as health, raising aspirations, and developing community citizenship traits), requires certain coaching skills that are not necessarily endemic within the realm of acquiring sport skills for the sake of sport skills/performance. Furthermore, the context of recreational sport (with its focus arguably largely on maintaining participation), disability sport, youth sport, and sport for the elderly, all arguably require different emphases and subsequently, different coaching skills and objectives than coaches present and/or operating only within the performance spectrum.

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[1] The United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC), effectively started in 2002 by Sports Coach UK (scUK – now UK Coaching), is comprised of four functional coaching roles: assistant coach, coach, senior coach, and master coach. Having shaped contemporary approaches to coaching practice and more particularly coach education, it still exists as an endorsement process for a number of UK NGB coaching awards, although 1st4sport Qualifications (the trading arm of UK Coaching), now oversees the development and awarding of many NGB sport qualifications.

If much formal (i.e., through accredited courses and qualifications) coach education then traditionally relies on what may well be seen as performance related, conventional ways of coaching that are based on skill acquisition and/or leadership, then real-life coaches and real-life coaching problems in non-performance environments may not have their needs met. What this means, as many authors testify (e.g. Author, 2016; Griffiths & Armour, 2011; Taylor & McEwan, 2012), is that coach development within 'other' sports coaching contexts can be limited.

Indeed, we have already mentioned that alongside performance sport there are the additional coaching contexts of recreational sport, disability sport, youth sport, and sport for the elderly. There are, however, broad yet fine distinctions around performance and participation sport, often based upon developmental concerns. Trudel and Gilbert (2006), for instance, precisely outline the differences between recreational, developmental, and performance sport. Moreover, Côté et al. (2007), proposed four general coaching contexts, *Participation Coaches for Children*, *Participation Coaches for Teens and Adults*, *Performance Coaches for Young Adolescents*, and *Performance Coaches for Late Adolescents and Adults.* There have also been wider policy approaches applied within the UK context, for instance the SportsCoach UK (now UK Coaching) 4x4 model[2] that articulated coaching contexts through youth, participation, performance, and high performance, and the incoming (for 2023) Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) that use a typology of community, school, and elite coaching (GOV.UK, 2021). Central to all, however, are the key tenets of either performance related or psychosocial development and/or social policy objectives, and they articulate how distinctive practice features within the different contexts of sport competition and skills, and 'other' sports coaching contexts described above, can meaningfully be theorised, divided, and disentangled within conceptual models.

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[2] The scUK 4x4 Model, through easily demarcated and conceptualised children's, participation, performance, and elite (high performance) coach roles, acknowledges different coaching contexts and allows a range of coaching domains and perspectives to be formally acknowledged.

To add to this, there are also conflations between how grassroots sport and community sport are defined. For instance, references to "grassroots community sport policy delivery" in the work of Phillpots et al. (2010: 268), Hartmann's (2003) case study that outlines the grassroots view of a community-based sport programme, Adams' (2014) work that explores community-level sport policy within the context of grassroots sport, and Chapman et al.'s (2019) overview of effective community sport (football) coaches within the 'grassroots'. All of the aforementioned contexts arguably require different emphases and subsequently, different coaching skills and objectives than coaches present and/or operating only within the performance spectrum.

In the domain of community sports coaching, for instance, community sport participation projects frequently look to complement wider social policy and preventative services in the UK. The purpose of much of these sport-based social-inclusion type programmes is oftentimes wide ranging and complex. Examples here include projects that aim to specifically contribute to social and community development, for instance through volunteering, helping address systemic health inequalities that are often evident within areas of social deprivation, and looking to reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB) (Coalter, 2005; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011).

This definitional complexity throughout the different coaching contexts notwithstanding, this paper draws some distinctions between the different contexts, and focuses on the term community sport coaching (an area that Chapman et al. (2019) overview as concerned with social development and supporting social issues) as the specific coaching context in which the paper takes place.

Coach Learning, Development, and Community Sport Coaching

We refer above to formal coach education, and specifically note and frame this as a learning process that can be seen through accredited courses. In the context of this paper this is important, in that national governing bodies (NGB) regularly dictate, through formally recognised qualifications, the entry points for many job roles in coaching, irrespective of coaching context (particularly within the UK context). In this instance then, whilst we have referred to (formal) coach education and how it is more limited in terms of being inherently performance related, we must also acknowledge that there is a growing body of work specifically tailored to coach development. In framing the way that coaches learn through formal learning (qualifications etc.), non-formal learning (i.e. short courses, general continuous professional development), and informal learning, which is seen as more unstructured, social learning, we can see advantages and disadvantages within all of them, and yet also understand them as interconnected modes of learning rather than separated (Cushion et al., 2010). The consensus, however, is that formal learning can be too linear, absent of wider contextual understanding and application, and parameterised by an over-reliance on some sport-specific, skill acquisition type principles. Informal learning and interaction with others, on the other hand, are seen to proffer the most significant learning opportunities (Cushion et al., 2003; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014). Indeed, many coach development initiatives focus on facilitating mutual support systems and reinforcing professional practice and understanding through mentoring systems.

There is also a range of literature specifically referencing coaching fields, and best practice, outside of and different to performance only contexts within academia and policy. The work of Vierimaa et al. (2017), for instance, outlines how best practice in youth sport requires encouragement, a focus on fun and inclusivity, and adult relationships that support young people. Moreover, the work of Ives et al. (2021), highlights some of the inherently internal conversations related to occupational identity that community coaches experience, and the different ways that they deliver effective coaching practice in a fragile, unsecure (financially) work environment.

Overall, distinct differences, and a possible disconnect, between performance and community type coaching are evident within literature. This is in terms of the scope, professional support, and emphasis that underpins the more widely understood body of work supporting performance sport, and the more recent (comparatively), emerging body of work that investigates what the form, content, and philosophy of community sport coaching means (i.e. Busser & Carruthers, 2010; Debognies et al., 2018; Ekholm, & Dahlstedt, 2019). Generally then, the community sport coaching context is largely understood as focusing on a variety of developmental objectives, such as those included in social policy (Author, 2020a; Cronin & Armour, 2015; Super et al., 2018), and more bespoke, contextualised coach development and mentoring initiatives are considered more profound than many existing formal qualifications in terms of supporting applied practice.

Nevertheless, despite these assertions and the evidence pertaining to how community coaches can use different ways to underpin and regulate their applied practice, many authors acknowledge the difficulties that many coaches (including beginner-coaches) encounter, and have illustrated the fact that coaching (in the UK) is not classified as a profession (Lyle &

Cushion, 2016), meaning that at the less resourced levels (foundational) of sport, coaches are still reliant on learning and accruing educational capital garnered from formal coaching qualifications, and cannot (or do not know how to) access resources and best practice within academia (Author, 2021; Vallance, 2019).

Football in the Community (FitC) schemes – Albion in the Community

Even though current political discourse within the UK still positions sport as an integral 'tool' to support a wide variety of social policy objectives, austerity measures within the UK over the last decade plus have impacted significantly on wider funding patterns for sport (Author, 2020a). An example of how this has occurred can be seen through the systematically reduced local authority spend, that clearly includes any wider provision of non-mandatory spend for sport and recreation officers (Parnell et al., 2015), However, arguably in lieu of the aforementioned austerity driven cuts to community engagement and funding, one area that does currently significantly contribute to the promotion of sport in the community programmes is the sport of football.

Since the 1980s, Football in the Community (FitC) schemes have been used to address a wide range of social issues (Parnell et al., 2013; Watson, 2000). These types of schemes were initially set up by the Football League and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) in an effort to reengage with local communities, and reposition football clubs as beacons for local endeavours, inclusion, and practical attempts at increasing aspirational targets such as employability, reduced incidences of ASB, and increased community cohesion (Stone, 2018). The intended completion of targets such as these were facilitated through extending traditional coaching sessions (i.e. summer camps) for young people, and focusing on training, school work, and the like. The ethos of community development work, in partnership with wider accessibility to coaching (and potential screening of talent), persisted through the 1990s and

FiTC schemes now sit prominently within the Premier League and the Football League, and a relatively considerable body of empirical evidence now supports their effectiveness in addressing a range of social problems (Curran et al., 2014, Curran et al., 2017).

This well-established body of literature includes many of the positive influences that FitC schemes have had on people in the community, and that are now championed within policy circles. Much of the practice they undertake is contextualised within notions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Walters (2009), for instance, used Smith and Westerbeek's (2007) CSR model to highlight the effectiveness of the then Charlton Athletic Community Trust and the Brentford Football Club Community Sports Trust. Smith and Westerbeek's (2007) CSR theoretical framework, based on the premise that sport clubs/institutions are uniquely placed to deliver social policy objectives, centres on the following seven features: mass media distribution and communication power, youth appeal, positive health impacts, social interaction, cultural understanding and integration, sustainability awareness, and immediate gratification benefits.

More recent evidence supporting the effectiveness of FitC schemes in these types of fields and which reference the power of football clubs' names, reputations, and impact, includes Rutherford et al. (2014) who outline physical health improvement interventions undertaken by Notts County Football in the Community. Clearly, there is much evidence related to sport and physical activity benefits, irrespective of whether the sport is played or delivered by a FitC scheme. Yet, consistent influence and impact has been achieved through football clubs in many related social and health areas, for instance, Llewellyn et al. (2022) outline the benefits of community football programmes within Wales running mental health projects. Indeed, Pringle et al. (2021), who studied health improvement (physical and mental) provision by English FitC clubs, remarked on the positive connections that the football clubs could deliver and leverage with local populations. And as an overview of FitC impacts, Sanders et al.'s (2021) work outlining the perceptions of ten FitC CEOs' beliefs related to the effectiveness of FitC schemes, helps demonstrate much of the wider impact, transformational moments, and success that they can have.

City United Albion, established in 1990, is a prominent example of a FitC scheme, and is the context within which this Practical Advances paper operates. Indeed, City United Albion has previously been lauded for its projects and impact in an academic context, which centred on how City United Albion had supported marginilised people and communities in a variety of educational and supportive contexts and formats (Anonymous et al., 2014). The charity has grown exponentially over the last 30 years, and at time of writing reaches over 40,000 people each year across 60 community projects and employs approximately 45 full-time members of staff and a further 60 part-time staff (including football coaches to deliver their projects).

The projects that City United Albion oversee cover three strands of work. The first strand relates to participation in football, and is predominantly concerned with providing opportunities for participants (with two foci, one being youth sport and increased provision, and the second on persons with disabilities) to play football. The second strand is concerned with more aspirational, interpersonal skills related to educational achievement, lifelong learning, access to training opportunities, and broader employment prospects. The third strand focuses on well-being (for instance, mental health projects), and addressing systemic community disadvantages, particularly within identified areas of social deprivation within the city. These programmes include, but are not limited to, more widely accessible group training sessions (for various abilities and disabilities), as well as individual support programmes.

In all, City United Albion employs a large workforce including full-time football development officers, lead coaches, and community/grassroots coaches. All of these play an integral role in the support and development of their part-time coaching workforce, for instance, being ‘on hand’ to set appropriate working templates, conduct, and examples, to provide mentoring support and advice, and to help set the standards within their delivery.

Based on his knowledge of the internal workings of City United Albion (as Disability Manager), the second author is able to highlight how City United Albion adopts a pragmatic approach to coach education. Their internal systems seek to provide their coaches with effective support systems beyond the traditional qualification methods. Whilst this has historically been carried out through informal mentoring, they can also highlight the fact that numerous other coach education and context specific training opportunities have been made available to staff over an extended period of time. These include support for specific formal qualifications (i.e. futsal, progression from L1 to L2), non-formal workshops (such as ones outlining behaviour management, bereavement training, talent ID), Makaton training (a simplified version of sign language), and internal coaching conferences.

In addition, City United Albion has successfully run mentoring schemes for participants with a disability/disabilities, which has seen a small (but not insignificant) number of individuals progress from being a participant to becoming part-time coaches with City United Albion. These schemes have included direct mentoring support, opportunities to gain qualifications, and to meaningfully volunteer within sessions. In total, we believe that all of this demonstrates City United Albion’s strong commitment to supporting coaches beyond the traditional qualification frameworks.

Community/grassroots coaching: moving forward

Notwithstanding the abovementioned approaches to coach education and support within City United Albion, we feel it is fair to say that as regards a wider context, there are perhaps two major problems related to community sport coaching. The first is that the promotion of and subsequent sustainability of the types of projects they service requires significant funding, and frequently has to rely on the voluntary sector for support. The second problem, as already mentioned, is that there is a lack of specific (formal) coach education for the field. The context within which this Practical Advances paper operates lies within the parameters of both of these problems. This is because – despite the aforementioned City United Albion’s ethos of support and development - we reflect on, and analyse, a range of on-site evaluations and interviews undertaken with new community/grassroots sport coaches for City United Albion that focused on their community coaching skills.

As mentioned, the second author, ANONYMOUS NAME, is a current employee at City United Albion, and has (at time of writing) worked full time for them for 12 years, and including his current role as Disability Manager for the last six years. The first author, ANONYMOUS NAME, works with the second author on a peripheral basis for City United Albion (supporting some projects, student-coach placements and practice), and both have collaborated previously on various coach education projects for over a decade. With this insight, and fundamentally based on the premise that existing formal coach qualifications do not necessarily prepare coaches for the community sport coaching context, this Practical Advances paper then is situated within a FitC and concerned with the following: how these emerging, learning coaches operate, what they feel they need to work on, how they might be best supported, and how successful the existing coach support they are receiving is.

Much of the rationale for this sits in our own personal experiences, with a combined background of approximately 45 years of sport coaching (the majority of which has been community based, but also includes near 30 years in coach development roles – NGB/sport organisations) and/or youth work. Added to this, in our previous collaborations on coach education projects, we have consistently argued that community sport workers could and should occupy a prime position in front line engagement within areas with low sport participation and/or areas of social deprivation, yet that many times formal training and qualifications seem to inadequately prepare practitioners for some of the peculiarities and differences within the community context.

This Practical Advances paper set out to examine our thoughts and claims, by specifically focusing on the experiences of a number of emerging, learning coaches and the extent to which they felt confident and prepared to operate within the community sport coaching context. In order to help us, this broadscale research aim was then refined into the following two questions to guide our monitoring, evaluation, reflections, and feedback of existing practice:

- **Q 1:** How do the emerging, learning (new) community/grassroots sport coaches describe their work/coaching experiences and favoured learning opportunities, and the perceived appropriateness of their existing coaching qualifications?

- **Q 2:** To what extent is appropriate knowledge of the role, function, and impact of community/grassroots sport coaching context specific, and how much knowledge, and practice, is evident in emerging, learning (new) coaches in the field of community and grassroots sport?

Overview of practice - reflections on improving coach practice and supporting development and coaching 'literacy'.

Operating in the fashion of a case study, through an analysis of one strand of one particular FitC scheme, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback of existing practice was given to 13 coaches in total (all male, all remunerated and on contract), who all worked for City United Albion on either a part-time (11) or full-time basis (two). Whilst all of them had various experience of sport coaching (ranging from one to 22 years, M=7.85, SD=7.29**)**, crucially, all of them had less than two years' experience of coaching within the community sport context – thus making them 'new community/grassroots coaches' and therefore part of this paper's objectives of understanding how prepared the emerging, learning coaches for City United Albion’s FitC scheme felt. In terms of coaching qualifications, four held level 1 FA badges, six held level 2, and three had a level 3 (in either football or futsal) qualification. See *Table 1: Coach Experience* below for full participant demographics.

Coach	**How long coaching**	**Qualification**	**When achieved**	**Qualification**	**When achieved**	**Qualification**	**When achieved**
1	1 year	1	2019				
2	1 year	1	2018				
3	1 year	1	2018				
4	2 years	1	2016	2	2019		
5	4 years	1	2015	2	2017		
6	4 years	1	2015	2	2018	GK 1	
7	5 years	2		L1 Goalkeeper		L3 Futsal	2018
8	7 years	1	2015	2	2018		
9	8 years	2		Disability qualifications			
10	11 years	1	2008	2	2017		
11	20 years	1	2002	2	2012	L3 Football	2015
12	22 years	1	2006	2	2009		
13	16 years	L3 Football		L3 Futsal		L3 Youth	2018

Table 1: Coach Experience

The monitoring, evaluation, and feedback of existing practice took place over a 24-month period. Over this time, there were structured, formal observations with these 13 community/grassroots coaches new to the City United Albion system. These formal observations were led by the second author in their role of line manager and community coach educator for City United Albion. Overall, each of the new community/grassroots coaches was formally observed and given feedback twice within this 24-month period for a total of 26 observations. These systematic (loosely focused on enjoyable, meaningful participation) observations lasted approximately 60 minutes and focused on the core tenets of engaging and suitable activity for participants. Criteria included, but were not limited to, appropriate activities, effective communication, progressive activities, efficiency of planning, suitable differentiation, standards of professional behaviour, and a positive learning environment (including enjoyment, engagement, and participant satisfaction).

The rationale for these observations, within the professional context, was to ensure that a framework of standardisation, quality, and appropriateness of the coaches' sessions was undertaken. This process sought to ensure minimum standards, competency, and conduct, as well as to contribute to ideas of sharing good practice.

Each of the coaches received written reflections on their sessions, with action points, and met with the second author to discuss their ideas, responses, and feedback within the next two weeks of their formal observation. Additionally, alongside these formal observations, there were informal, quick, brief interactions/advisory observations (typically watching/observing approximately 20 minutes of a session and talking for 15-20 minutes afterwards) taking place with the same coaches on a bi-monthly format. Typically, these observations would occur within recreational football/sport sessions, either within after school or community based (and disability) environments, or (at times) developmental pathway contexts (for those coaches who were aspiring towards working with the academy or performance hubs for City United Albion). Here, in a supervisory yet supportive fashion, the second author would outline and discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses with each of the same coaches. Overall, 78 of these informal, quick interventions took place, resulting in a total of 104 pieces of observational and conversational data (in the manner of written reflections and feedback).

In order to support further investigation into professional practice, short (approx. 10-15 minutes) semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with each of the 13 new community/grassroots coaches after meeting with the second author for their second observation. The new community/grassroots coaches were asked a range of questions to establish their experiences within 'community sport', for instance, how long they had been coaching, which qualifications had they achieved, how much of the content they had learnt had they applied to their coaching, and what the biggest influences on their coaching were. In many respects, alongside operating as a broader method to investigate the current coaching practice of the coaches, and thus inform future and/or bespoke internal coach education plans, these interview questions were deliberately designed to support the development of their coaching and allow, through limited use of prompts and direct questions, an opportunity for the coaches to freely express thoughts and recollections. Moreover, the intention, informed by professional practice and expectations, was to allow the interviewees scope to explore and use reflective practice, and contribute - in part - to the identification of particular strengths, weaknesses or concerns that they recognised. Interviews were deliberately designed then, to allow the coaches leeway to express reflections on their professional practice.

Each of these interviews were recorded and transcribed, and combined with the information and reflections garnered from the observations and feedback, allowed us to review the fundamental principles guiding the work, practice, and philosophies of the City United Albion new community/grassroots coaches and elaborate on the key questions we had set to guide our understanding.

Data Analysis

The data generated from these two methods (observations, short interviews, total - 117 data points) was combined and then analysed to explore our guiding questions. An inductive approach to analysing the data took place in order to identify emerging and then recurrent themes and commonalities (Bryant & Charmaz 2007). As the data analysis progressed and refinement of the themes and commonalties took place, a resultant categorisation of the results in relation to the two previously stated guiding questions was developed.

For the purposes of transparency and recognising how our current (particularly the second author's position within City United Albion) and previous experience may well have shaped our interpretations of the data, we feel it is important here to note that there are certain behaviours, practice, and traits that we view positively (in essence ones that encourage enjoyment, connections, and participants satisfaction). In order to limit any possible bias occurring here, we engaged in a process of data analysis that went back and forth, iteratively, to ensure that we checked and rechecked the data, and created as objective a consensus as possible.

Also note, that as we have positioned this as a Practical Advances paper, one that is based upon a ‘practical and applied perspective’ and how we might illustrate best practices (and/or contribute to how we would consider ‘developing’ this in future) of a specific documented effort’, we sought to highlight exactly what ‘happened’ in regards to community coach observations and support, and our subsequent reflections and interpretations of practice. In this sense, whilst much of the paper is ‘research’ oriented, this is not so in the sense of a traditional academic undertaking. Instead, if anything, it operates through taking more of an ‘action research’ stance, one that is firmly encamped within the field of applied practice. This can be explained through examining the premise of action research, which is to actively inform future practice, through cycling through iterations of planning, ongoing research, and modifying existing practice (Somekh, 2005). Indeed, the rationale for the research, reflections, and applications within this paper were always intended to move beyond the acquisition of data in and of itself (arguably a relatively fixed concept) and to account for ‘how’ changes could be effected, and to actively implement them.

The next section outlines the results of our reflections we had set ourselves with our key questions, and what we identified as themes and subthemes. At times, we refer to and use quotes from the interviews, and these are presented in anonymised fashion, with any reference to the new community/grassroots coaches designated by numbers only to differentiate between them.

Benefits of qualifications and extended learning preferences

The first question we asked ourselves was what the emerging/new community/grassroots sport coaches thought of their working practice and learning opportunities, and the extent to which their existing coaching qualifications had appropriately prepared and/or supported them. First, all of the coaches saw the *incremental benefits* of gaining coaching badges in relation to minimum standards of understanding and deployment. As an example, three of the level 1 coaches felt that, with respect to the content they applied to coaching, they had “used most of” (C2/C3/C6) it at a basic level, with one stating that the course content was “ok, I used bits and pieces but heard L2 more relevant” (C4).

Those that had completed their level 2 qualifications, in contrast, were more bullish in their reflections on how much they had used, with all of them stating that they had used “practically all” of the material. Indeed, this confidence extended to several giving specific details on certain sessions and the like that they felt were very helpful in terms of technical knowledge. The level 3 coaches extended this frame of answers, stating that the Level 3 qualification had further influenced their learning, through such mechanisms as allowing and fostering “lots of trial and error in delivery but have opportunity to do so in a formative fashion” (C7).

Admittedly, these are simple enough answers. However, we also found a second subtheme, *practical and mentoring opportunities*, that related to the first question of how the coaches described their favoured learning opportunities. This uncovered the fact that the preferred learning methods of all of the coaches sat outside of traditional, formal education. Here, all of the coaches revealed that mentoring, practicing, and observing others, illustrated by “working with other coaches” (C1), “being mentored” (C2/C3/C4/C5), and “practically coaching and watching and learning from other coaches” (C6/C2/C13), were their preferred methods of reflecting upon and improving their practice. Interestingly, many of the coaches also pointed to having their existing practice positively, substantively impacted by other environments. This is illustrated through such findings as “coaching as much as possible in different environments” (C8), “other sports” (C10), and learning from the players themselves (C5/C6).

Overall, our reflections and understanding related to Q1 show what the coaches considered were the main constituents of learning to coach (in a generic sense). Whilst there were no explicit discoveries related to what coaches may need to develop effectively, the coaches did feel that they needed to learn some basic guidelines through formal qualifications - but then subsequently needed to engage in the process of coaching as well as benefit from learning from others (whether through mentoring, observing, etc.). This concurs with the accepted literature related to experiential leaning, whereby understanding, competency, proficiency, and expertise are extended beyond traditional educational formats (i.e. formal qualifications/official accreditation, and non-formal learning such as small courses and workshops), by specifically working and reflecting on in-situ, on-the-job, settings, contexts, and practical application (Author, 2018b; Erickson et al., 2008; Miettinen, 2000, Van Woezik, et al., 2021).

Widely recognised as the most important way of developing vocational, professional skills within the field of coaching (Cushion et al. 2010) and work systems as a whole (Compton & Compton 2016; Kuk & Holst 2018), much of this first-hand, on-the-job experience is seen to accelerate learning through: reflecting on one’s own performance (Knowles et al., 2006); from observing others’ professional practice (Cushion et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2007); through direct support and advice in the field (i.e. advisory systems and mentoring); and also incidental learning - which takes place as a by-product of other activities, such as social interaction and observing others, and is unintentional, yet a positive influence (Author, 2018b). Whilst the benefit of mentoring, informal learning opportunities, and work placed practice does hold true across most coaching contexts (for instance, Chapman et al., 2019; Leeder et al., 2022, Sawiuk et al., 2018, and Van Woezik, et al., 2021), in the findings outlined in this paper the processes seem to be particularly helpful and effective. Indeed, and specific to the learning context of youth/community football coaches, the results here strongly concur with those of Hertting (2019), who stated that flexibility and mentoring systems/informal learning were best suited to complement a framework of mandatory education.

The essentiality of onsite and experiential learning - extending qualification foundations through mentoring and support, the (then) City United Albion approach

The second question we used to guide our monitoring and evaluation sought to determine the extent to which training programmes and qualifications had prepared newly qualified/beginner (community/grassroots) coaches. Building a variety of core competencies through qualifications only, has been seen to lead to variations in newly qualified/beginner (community/grassroots) coaches' readiness, professional knowledge, and ability to engage in professional level work (Author, 2020b). In so much as orthodox formulations of existing entry level (1) coach qualifications in the UK seek to provide a platform for workers as 'assistant' coaches, and the level 2 qualifications meet the generally accepted wider criteria for 'lead coaches', it stands to reason that coaches entering what is often the more contested reality (for instance, beyond peer coaching) that the workplace presents, will experience a wider range of challenges.

It in this context that the second author sought to observe, support, and standardise the work and the psychological and social processes (such as positive relationships) at play within interactions between the coaches and the participants within City United Albion's community engagement programme. Whilst the second subtheme in the first theme at first glance appears to perhaps quite closely correspond to the second theme, the subtle difference is that here we outline City United Albion's (then) approach of guiding the coaches (and subsequent impact), and the specific thoughts and recollections of the second author. Of note, and linked to the idea of social processes just mentioned, the intentions of many of the objectives of the coaching sessions led by the coaches centred on developing relationships, life skills, and supporting various other social and health initiatives through what can be termed sport *and* social intervention (sport projects that embed a number of non-sport objectives projects) programmes (Buelens, et al., 2015; Author, 2021). Given this, the second author sought to determine standards, and oversee improvements if necessary, for the 13 community/grassroots coaches new to the City United Albion system through structured, formal observations that centred on enjoyable, meaningful participation.

The results from this element of monitoring, evaluation, and personal interventions, advice, and joint problem-solving (through probing questions), one that uses the professional support systems in place at City United Albion, are presented below in *Table 2: Coach Observations.* Of note, these are deliberately situated within the context of how coaches could 'improve', and are mindful and informed by Côté et al.'s (2007) previously mentioned coaching definitions of 'Participation Coaches', and Côté and Gilbert's (2009) outline of coaching expertise and effectiveness (whereby coaches' ability to interact and engage with participants demonstrates coach knowledge and ability), irrespective of domain. Using these, the recommended 'improvements' centred on what areas needed focus, and how coaches could relate their session aims more to the principles of participation as opposed to sporting performance/excellence (all per City United Albion community coaching aims). Whilst positive elements of coaching were recorded, the nature of 'feed forward' feedback (Wolstencroft & de Main, 2021) underpins, in totality, the common reflections and advisory feedback evident in *Table 2: Coach Observations* below:

Common themes from coach observations	
Positive behaviours	**Areas for improvement**
Good player engagement during sessions	Poor behaviour management
Coaches are inquisitive or open to learning	Drills lacked consistency
Coaches had appropriate equipment	Inability to be flexible in planning/delivery
Sessions were planned in advance of delivery	Over-reliance on line-drills

Coaches adapted and learnt quickly during sessions	Lack of player/participant engagement
	Minimal contact for players with coaches
	Minimum contact with ball for players
	Coaches had one style – autocratic
	Coaches lacked control due to rigidness of approach
	High emphasis on performance / result rather than fun or engagement,
	Lack of awareness of different ability levels

Table 2: Coach Observations

Throughout the observations, it was relatively evident how the coaches' range of experiences (i.e., their previous coaching experience, whether they were well-versed, novice, or newly qualified) influenced their coaching. From a positive perspective, all of the coaches were generally well-prepared and showed a desire to learn and progress their coaching. Overall, their primary skills (no doubt informed by formal qualifications) such as planning sessions, safeguarding standards and providing safe environments for participants were clearly displayed. However, some of the issues observed related to an inflexibility in the coaches' delivery and an over-reliance on a small number of practices (essentially those taught within official qualifications, in the sense that they were more skill and performance oriented); this resulted in mixed participant experiences around some poor behaviour management, engagement and differentiation.

Overall then, in terms of practice design, implementation, and methods, the coaches as a whole displayed some habits that erred away from some of the true principles necessary for participation coaching. For instance, the already mentioned engagement and differentiation, as well as fun, positive communication, high activity, motivating participants (ensuring they come back), and dealing with group and individual problems (Author, 2020b; Hopkinson, 2014).

As can be seen from the results of the observations, many of the 13 new community/grassroots coaches displayed practice that might be seen as counter-intuitive to facilitating maximum activity and enjoyment. Focusing on performance, being rigid in approach, lacking an ability to differentiate, overemphasising the role of the coach compared to the participants, and poor behaviour management are all elements of feedback that demonstrate how, on the whole, coaching practice was constrained through a prism of performance coaching principles – essentially the wrong context. There was also, importantly, some divergence and discord between what had been the relatively positive understandings of coaching that the coaches had attributed to themselves in the first section (through the short interviews), and the results continued and apparent within this second section.

In total, it would be fair to say that the second author's observations shed light on what can be seen, at times, as the newly qualified/beginner (community/grassroots) coaches (whilst displaying some admirable qualities) being seemingly unable to break historical poor practice design and implementation. Moreover, the general impression formed was that the sessions and approaches lacked, overall, a sense of drive beyond what traditional 'professional' coaching qualifications and coach requirements seem to embed/promote at lower levels.

Much of this was, no doubt, due to the manner in which the minority of coaches who 'work' in the profession of football with full time equivalent wages (where continuous professional development is often compulsory), have to gain their initial qualifications with the majority of coaches who operate in the voluntary sector, where completing a basic course is sufficient to coach for years. Expecting short courses to address, check, and ensure a wide totality of coaching expertise in such a brief intervention (a matter of several weekends at level 1), would likely be impossible (or at the least tremendously difficult), leading to further development, support, and reflection (or combination thereof) being necessary to improve and likely meet professional standards. Indeed, in some respects this may well be reflective of much previous literature that critiques formal coach education systems (Author, 2016/18a), preferred methods of acquiring coaching knowledge (Erickson et al., 2008), and how resistance to culture change (i.e. different coaching philosophies and objectives) in sports organisations exists (Spaaij et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is also the strong possibility that emerging, learning coaches (essentially ‘beginner’ coaches) face issues, through unfamiliarity, in transitioning to (and developing) professional practice, and navigating time-restrictions and new coach education systems (Anonymous & Author, 2022; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005).

Overall, the results from our monitoring and evaluation, and our understanding of them within the context of the questions we set out to answer, highlight the following: that coach education systems provided a platform for coach delivery and a basic knowledge; that coaches found mentors or other coaches significantly influenced their practice; and lastly, that coaches also found learning through experience and working with players ultimately influenced their own coaching more than their qualifications. Overall then, whilst behaviour management and catering for a diverse range of players were missing as skill sets for a high percentage of coaches (although the more experienced coaches were more adept in this area), and coaches seemed to lack flexibility in their delivery and planning and only those with more experience were able to adapt drills/sessions confidently, the coaches improved through gaining experience and, importantly, specific interventions (i.e. through regular delivery, feedback, and guidance by other coaches or mentors).

Quite clearly then, this paper demonstrates that formal coaching education, in many cases, inadequately prepares coaches for the community/grassroots context. Institutions, sport providers, and coach education programmes in general should be aware of the need to balance formal qualifications and nationally agreed minimum standards of deployment, with appropriate and supportive professional context-worthy education. In the next (final) section, alongside summarising the paper, we will briefly detail how the City United Albion FitC scheme has started to oversee training and supervision that incorporates a specific sensibility to the participant and community coaching contexts.

Conclusion

The monitoring, evaluation, and feedback we undertook within this Practical Advances paper uses professional guidance and the real-world application of coach education to address the challenges inherent in supporting new entrants to the profession of community/grassroots coaching. Here, the context presented both within this paper and wider literature (i.e. Gilbert et al., 2009; Luguetti et al., 2017), posits that it is becoming increasingly evident within community-based sports sessions (in particular grassroots sports) that whilst knowledge of how to deliver effective sessions has improved (within academic and professional environments), this information is not necessarily reaching coaches delivering at grassroots level through the sole practice of formal coaching pathways. As this Practical Advances paper evidences, this is resulting in continued poor practices being delivered, unless questioning of these takes place.

Indeed, our overarching research aim was to examine the extent to which the emerging, learning coaches felt prepared to operate within the community sport coaching context, and in this we feel that our intentions have been met. Moreover, we argue that what it adds, whilst not necessarily entirely novel or unexpected, and perhaps more confirmatory in nature at first glance, is a particular insight into the professional workings of a FitC programme and potential future practical implications. Given that this professional domain is still (in many respects) in a state of flux, and given the high ‘churn’ rate of well-funded community programmes through promotion and relegation processes (as well as the short-term nature of related funding initiatives), there are few well-established FitC programmes in the UK that are not subject to possible significant funding variations year on year. To be clear then, by well-established we mean programmes that have had consistent funding streams and have been allowed to fully develop as institutions and cultures. The City United Albion programme, for instance, has only received the Premier League payments towards community provision for a period of five years at time of writing, in many respects a short time to plan, implement, deliver, and oversee a wide range of institutional support processes, including coach recruitment, training, and support. As an example, internal coach education programmes (such as the observations and feedback outlined in this paper), require significant resource and must be balanced against meeting community and operational targets.

In returning to our first reflection, and subsequent theme (based on the first of two questions we used to guide our reflections and feedback of existing practice), *Benefits of qualifications and extended learning preferences*, we found that the new community/grassroots coaches felt that coaching qualifications were a good base and foundation upon which they could construct their coaching competence, knowledge, and delivery and practice. They also felt that mentoring type programmes and extending their learning through observing others was a natural progression and, oftentimes, led to more meaningful knowledge and practice construction. The second theme that we found (more so based on the second question we used to guide our monitoring and evaluation), *The essentiality of onsite and experiential learning - extending qualification foundations through mentoring and support*, was perhaps more critical in that it shifted gaze from participant introspection and reflection, to observation of practice. Here, whilst there are various different coach education systems in place, they seem – in practice - to at times be unable to effectively develop coaches' knowledge of simple engagement practices and core participation aims. Indeed, the results of this second theme indicate ongoing structural issues related to the ethos of coach qualification (NGB) programmes (Twitchen & Oakley, 2019), and the persistence of what can be termed internally competing discourses and struggles to adapt and develop professional practice - demonstrating resistance to culture change, i.e, Spaaij et al., (2018) – within the community/grassroots coaching context. To be sure, this second theme reinforced how new community/grassroots sports coaches struggle to balance the relative salience of performance type coaching edicts within the community/grassroots context, with actions and practice that are more contextually specific (Author, 2020b).

In part, the differences between the construct and belief of the coaches evident in the first theme, and the more critical feedback within the second theme, are perhaps reflective of the nature (and some of the limitations) of this Practical Advances paper. Admittedly, at a more simplistic level it is necessary for the authors to acknowledge that the professional context and expectations of the formal observation process, whilst fundamentally concerned with improving coaching 'literacy' and expertise within the specific context the coaches were operating in, may well have been skewed in terms of expectations and existing biases of the authors. In short, the observations were intended to 'find' practice that could be commented on and improved, and we must note that they took place in the context of operational work and on-going, standardization and continuous professional development activities that the second author oversees.

Nevertheless, the paper does contribute to existing practice and literature pertaining to professional support and mentoring systems in coaching (Jones et al., 2009; Leeder et al., 2022)., much in part because it is applied in a professional, meaningful, real-world context, particularly in light of the positions and roles that the authors inhabit. What is perhaps of most note, is that the key implications from our reflections suggest that: first) current coach education systems are not sufficiently providing coaches with the broad skill set required to deliver in grassroots or community sports and coaches are learning more through experience than qualifications, and second) formalised support programmes can benefit new coaches through accessing mentor knowledge. There is also a third, significant implication that reflects how we strongly believe that we bring an authenticity as practitioners reporting on the very nature of what 'happened', and have recognised a potential to build upon this and (in some ways) future proof the coaching philosophy and coach development systems for City United Albion.

In this respect then, per the *International Sport Coaching Journal's* ethos regarding Practical Advances papers about, with, and for coaches, the results of this paper helped set the scene for the City United Albion DNA system, that at time of writing is already in motion. In brief, this system is a framework that details the delivery philosophy of the City United Albion FitC scheme. Fundamentally predicated on ensuring consistency of what are considered 'good' and 'meaningful' sessions for participants through intentionally, rather than incidentally, achieving coaching and social outcomes, the framework is embedded through practice, theory, and continuous standardisation processes. Moreover, it provides internal coaching conferences and forums, and uses a guided discovery platform as part of ongoing continuous professional development. The City United Albion DNA system was, in part, informed and guided by the results of this Practical Advances paper, and we look to outline and reflect in more detail on the City United Albion (FitC scheme) DNA system in the future.

Overall then, the authors posit that much 'learning' in the context of community/grassroots coaching is seen to be 'enabled' best through informal learning, the more unstructured, reflective, self-directed type of acquiring knowledge and skills that oftentimes comes through experiential learning. It is for organisations that oversee coaching staff in the context of this Practical Advances paper (community and grassroots coaching, and potentially some other FitC programmes), to shift from what can be an over-reliance on 'amateur' or volunteer coaches (or approaches), and instead provide and reinforce not only the content of coach education programmes, but further the support systems around coaches to promote continued development.

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