"I was forming a thought as we were chatting": Narrative pedagogy stimulates coach developers learning about personal epistemology

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Key points

This research introduces the concept of developing coaches' personal epistemology (beliefs about knowledge) through narrative pedagogy: an educational approach based on story telling.

The research suggests that coach developers would benefit from a greater understanding of personal epistemology and that narrative pedagogy is a suitable means to encourage exploration of this topic.

Supplementary file A: Transcripts of narratives

Narrative 1: 'How my beliefs about knowledge have developed, and how they influence my coaching'

"This is a story of how my beliefs about knowledge have developed over my life and career. It's about how early experiences and people in my life have shaped my view of knowledge and knowing and how these have influenced, and continue to influence, my beliefs, philosophy and my practical coaching.

I can trace some of the most important influences on my personal beliefs back to my childhood. As a kid, I lived on open farmland in the countryside. My parents gave me loads of freedom to roam around and explore where we lived. I was free to jump over the fence and just leg it off into open countryside to climb trees, play in rivers and generally have adventures. My parents gave me the freedom to be independent and develop that adventurous spirit. For me, having freedom to roam definitely led me to figuring things out for myself and making my own decisions. I was constantly trying to make sense of something and evaluating it. I mean, if you climb a hundred trees, there's a thousand ways to climb them and if it doesn't work, you try and find out why. There's any number of ways to solve a problem. I was able to get out there and unpack things and see what the real world was about. I guess that even at that early age, I believed that if I wanted to know about something, it was a case of me figuring it out through trial and error, but ultimately it was me myself that would generate the knowledge.

Later, at school I had an environmental studies teacher called Rick. Rick was exceptional in his approach. He was supportive and empowering, and looked to hand over the reins but was always there to catch you when it didn't quite work. He was really knowledgeable about his subject, and he put it across in a passionate way; he allowed us to explore the subject with an element of freedom, independence and empowerment, and this really worked for me as it fitted with my beliefs about learning new things.

Other than Rick, I found school quite restricting. Because of my early experiences, I came to school with this kind of 'critical-thinking, problem-solving' way of thinking where I liked to figure out my own knowledge and can appreciate different ways of doing things. School was more of a 'this is how it's done' approach. And when I tried to ask the 'what if' questions…. well, they didn't entertain 'what if' questions; it's "no, this is what it is". I felt that, in the classroom, I was being held in this kind of fixed, absolute kind of setting and it didn't fit so well with me as it contradicted the beliefs that I had already developed. "For example, take maths… maths in school was taught in a really black-and-white way. Teachers would take the approach that this is 'the' way to solve this or that problem. But for me, even at quite a young age, maths was really functional and used to solve everyday problems. It was about working out bearings in the mountains or working out timings for leg of nav on the hill and there's different ways of doing that stuff, but that just wasn't how it was taught in school".

In hindsight, I think the beliefs about knowledge that I developed in those early years before school were very strong and almost overrode what was being thrown at me in the classroom. I felt that school was about black-and-white, and I wanted the shades of grey. Although I generally had a good time at school and university, as I look back now, I think they really just strengthened my belief that knowledge is developed through critical thinking, evaluating, reflecting; and accepting that every situation is different and needs its own solution.

My way of thinking about how knowledge is developed was very influential when I came into coaching. It's fair to say that early on in my coaching career, when I was trying to make sense of it all, I wanted that certain, objective, safe knowledge from the NGBs and the books etc. Doing coaching is different to learning about coaching, it's complex, and one way to manage that complexity is to treat it as something simpler than it is. For example, if you just follow the NGB standard - like Body, Boat, Blade or something, you won't go too far wrong. But fairly quickly, a bit like when I was climbing trees and building rafts as a kid, I moved on to seeing coaching as more subjective, trial-and-error, figuring things out myself and working out what actually works in that specific situation when I'm working with *people. When I first started coaching white water kayaking, I had this image in my head, like a technical template, of 'what' skills should be performed; and alongside this a coaching template to 'how' they should be coached. But pretty early on, I realised that my template didn't fit every learner. Paddlers are different shapes and sizes, have different equipment, and have different physical and psychological makeups – so suddenly my technical model did not fit everyone; likewise, they all had differing motivations, prior knowledge and learning backgrounds, so again my coaching template needed adjusting. So, rather than impose my technical and coaching templates, I had to figure out a way to help learners with their different needs; I wasn't prepared to accept there was only 'one way' of doing something as fellow coaches and aspects of my NGB coach training led me to believe at the time. I had to think it through, test it out and evaluate if it was effective; and if not, it's back to the drawing board.*

Ultimately, the beliefs that I developed as a kid translated into my beliefs as a coach and they influenced, and continue to influence, me as a coach. For example, my belief that coaching is really subjective and ever changing makes me continue to reflect, evaluate and strive to find the best solution in any given circumstance.

I liked having my own independence when I was a youth and as I was developing, and that independence I had then was very powerful and beneficial to me. This now transfers nicely in all the work I do in adventure sports world where the coach isn't always right there to help and therefore developing independence becomes so important. So therefore, when I'm coaching, developing independence in others is core to what I like doing; I just want people to feel they've got the freedom to direct their own learning. For example, when taking a group on a river, I want them to have the autonomy to direct how they want to experience the journey and learn the skills. I want them to feel empowered and in control; being involved in choosing where to go, when to go, how much leading or how much being led. I aim to lead from the back and encourage them as early as possible to be out at the front and making decisions, but equally if they don't want to be that is fine. If not at the front though they are not 'following the leader's line' they are 'learning from the leader's line and deciding whether to follow it or adapt it'. It's about putting them in the driving seat, but being there to support their decision making as is required. So, for me, in my coaching, there's freedom within the decision making, that decision making can allow them to either direct their own learning or direct where they want to go, or what they want to get out of their time with me."

Narrative 2: My paradigm shift

"Later on in my career, as a continuation of British Canoeing's Coaching Diploma I studied, I carried on to do a master's degree in Performance Coaching. The concept of going back to university at this stage of my career was such an exciting opportunity; I felt I had so much coaching experience from the world of adventure sports but was desperate to 'check and challenge' this against other sports and theoretical constructs. One of the first things I was asked to do on the course was to formulate a view of what constitutes the coaching process and then present a model to represent this view – like creating a structured framework for coaching; what did I see as the component parts (e.g. interpersonal skills, instruction,

practice, feedback) and then how did they fit together? It was an interesting project and really got me thinking about how I conceptualised coaching. I was influenced a lot by the work of other academics as well as my own reflections as a coach and coach educator.

At that time, I was at the top of my game, not only as a coach but also as a coach educator. In terms of British Canoeing stuff, I was a level 5 coach training director and assessor and was involved with the formulation of the new (at the time) UKCC qualifications. So, this task was right up my street!

I embraced the task and began to formulate my own model of coaching. It took the form of a lot of interlinking boxes, each relating to a different aspect of the coaching process; for example, I could base my model on a 'plan, do, review and conclude' cycle; but within each of these stages a load more component parts were required. In the 'do' part then I needed to show the differing approaches to skill acquisition alongside the range of teaching styles that could be used and then this mapped against differences in the learners; it was then a similar challenge for the 'review' stage and so on. Then there were the other parts of the process that this did not encapsulate like the interpersonal side, the motivational climate, the environmental context, the coach/learners' values and beliefs, and the external constraints. I was trying to break it all down, compartmentalise different components and organise it all together into a coherent structure. I guess, at that time it represented my perspective of coach education in that I wanted to break it down to make it more manageable for new coaches to learn. Very quickly my model got very big and eventually it ended up spreading over five pages. But it wasn't until I had to stand up and present it to the tutor and my peers that I had a sudden epiphany:

I didn't believe in what I was presenting!

After my presentation, I sat and listened to my peers giving theirs, and that just confirmed what I was thinking. We were all trying to reduce the coaching process down and break it into 'understandable parts' to make it digestible and manageable, but that just didn't make sense to me; I didn't believe in it. I just wasn't convinced that the whole coaching process could be broken down and compartmentalised like that; it's far too complex.

Coaching is about people, and people are complicated, and coaching them is messy! Breaking it all down into neat little boxes didn't make sense to me. And that was my lightbulb moment – we need to embrace the messiness…. right from the start! And it was that concept … to embrace the messiness and embrace the complexity of coaching; and if we try and put it into boxes, and keep it in boxes, we're not actually doing anybody any favours in the long term because that's not what happens in coaching; there are too many variables, and they are too interlinked. For example, I was out on the sea coaching two people on the Falls of Lora tidal flows not so long ago; in essence they had booked some private coaching to learn the same thing – moving water skills in a sea kayak. In discussion they had a similar amount of paddling experience and were paddling the same type of sea kayak – so the session on paper should have been pretty straightforward. However, once on the water it became abundantly clear that one was very anxious and one was very confident, one wanted to just 'give it a go' and one wanted 'slow and steady', one asked for technical understanding of why things worked and one wanted to just know what works best and one wanted to learn to 'survive' future tidal races and one wanted to learn to 'play' in future tidal races. A seemingly simple coaching session had very quickly turned complicated and messy – something that seems to happen all the time in my coaching!

I might end up coaching two people the same thing, but in a completely different way. I have to accept a level of uncertainty when I'm making decisions about how to coach –that is, will this work for that learner right here, right now? So, embracing the messiness, the complexity of coaching, and not protecting our new coaches from that, I think is really

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Abstract

Sports coaching research has consistently demonstrated a link between a well-developed personal epistemology (beliefs about knowledge and knowing) and adaptable coaching behaviours. Given this connection, coach developers could benefit from learning about personal epistemology and the potential it has for the coaches they support. As such, this project utilised narrative pedagogy, a psycho-socio-cultural approach to learning grounded in the exploration of stories, to understand a) what coach developers took away from learning about personal epistemology and b) the extent to which narrative pedagogy is a valuable form of continuous professional development (CPD) for coach developers. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we propose that the content of personal epistemology, delivered to experienced coach developers through the medium of narrative pedagogy, can act as: 1) a stimulus for connection; 2) a stimulus for meaning making; 3) a stimulus for new ideas; and 4) a stimulus for change. The themes illustrate how narrative learning can support CPD for experienced practitioners by engaging coach developers with the role of epistemic beliefs in coaching. In conclusion, personal epistemology is useful content for coach developers and narrative pedagogy is an appropriate way to engage coach developers with such complex and challenging content.

Keywords

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Introduction

Personal epistemology and sports coaching

Learning to coach is a complex process requiring the acquisition, integration and application of knowledge to ever-changing social contexts (Wood et al., 2024). Accordingly, a growing body of literature seeks to understand the processes by which coaches develop knowledge and learn their craft (Culver et al., 2019; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2016). Within this literature, there has been a growing emphasis on the social aspects of learning (Culver et al., 2024; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2016) whereby an individual 'constructs' knowledge through their experiences and interactions with others (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014). However, there has been relatively less attention on the nature of that knowledge as constructed at an individual level.

When individuals develop new knowledge, an instinctive, highly personalised process of cognition is activated (Hofer, 2002). This process is underpinned by an, often subconscious, set of personal beliefs about knowing and knowledge termed personal epistemology. Although epistemological — and onto-epistemological — thinking is foundational to methodological reasoning in academic contexts, it has received far less attention in applied domains such as sports coaching. While not a 'new' topic philosophically, the study of how coaches develop beliefs about knowledge and knowing in relation to their craft remains underexplored and conceptually emergent. Contemporary frameworks of personal epistemology such as the Theory of Integrated Domains in Epistemology [(TIDE) Muis, 2006)] and extended TIDE (Merk et al., 2018) maintain that epistemic beliefs are complex and socially developed; that is, beliefs are actively constructed through a diverse range of experiences in a myriad of social settings (schools, workplaces, NGBs). Beliefs are thought to develop in a stage-like manner, with more advanced stages reflecting higher levels of education and intellectual ability (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). Development starts from a position of *absolutism* whereby knowledge is viewed as directly knowable, sourced externally, and consists of objective and certain facts which are justified by appeal to reality. In the following stage, *multiplism,* the source of

knowledge shifts to being located in the self and is viewed as multiple, subjective, uncertain and justified by opinion and preference. In the final stage, *evaluativism*, the knower is able to coordinate subjective and objective components of knowledge. Thus, complexity and uncertainty are accepted, and knowledge viewed as personally constructed by human minds whereby individuals see themselves as part of the process of knowledge by critically evaluating and weighing different viewpoints (Barzilai & Eshet-Alkalai, 2015; Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). Individuals operating an evaluativist personal epistemology have been described as epistemologically 'sophisticated' (Schommer, 1998), epistemologically 'mature' (Kuhn et al., 2000) and 'more constructivist' (Muis et al., 2016). Each of these terms represents a more advanced conception of the nature of knowledge and is seen as desirable.

Although the TIDE frameworks advocate a stage-like progression in the development of epistemological beliefs, they also acknowledge the potential for recursive movement—where beliefs may temporarily regress to earlier stages. This regression is particularly evident when individuals transition from structured, predictable learning environments to more autonomous and less-defined contexts (Muis et al., 2006; Stodolsky et al., 1991). In the domain of sports coaching, such disruptions may occur during transitions between roles, clubs, or qualification levels, where the demands of new social contexts challenge previously held beliefs and practices (Christian et al., 2023). This more detailed understanding of knowledge and its development can shed light on the experiences of developing coaches and guide coach developers (Christian et al., 2023). For example, when presented with competing frameworks, all of which offer an incomplete understanding of reality, an individual in the absolutist stage would ask which theory is correct, the multiplist would become frustrated by competing options, while the evaluativist would accept and be comfortable navigating the uncertainty.

In an extension to the developmental stage perspective, Muis at al. (2006, 2016) highlight the notion of domain specificity of epistemic beliefs. Specifically, Muis et al. (2016) found variation in the stage

of beliefs between students' conceptions of mathematics (more absolutist) and psychology and general knowledge (more multiplist). It follows that a coach's personal epistemology may be specific to sports coaching as a distinct domain of knowledge. Furthermore, Merk et al. (2018) argue the existence of an even 'finer grain' level of belief, as topic specific beliefs within domain beliefs. In the instance of sports coaching as a multidisciplinary domain of knowledge, it is conceivable that a coach may hold varying levels of belief about knowledge of, for example, biomechanical and psycho-social principles. The complexity of belief structures outlined by the TIDE and Extended TIDE frameworks illustrate how the stages of absolutism, multiplism and evaluativism are useful broad categories to start thinking about learners and how to best engage with them, but also that these are only a starting point to encourage more nuanced thinking.

Notwithstanding the complex nature of epistemic beliefs, research has consistently demonstrated a link between a well-developed (i.e., evaluativist) personal epistemology and sophisticated pedagogical behaviours (Barry et al., 2023; Christian et al., 2017; Christian et al, 2023; Collins et al., 2015; Lodewyk, 2015; Melhuish & Ryan, 2024). Grecic and Collins (2013) conceived of the connection between epistemic beliefs and coaching actions as an 'epistemological chain' that underpins a coach's planning, creation of the learning environment, coaching actions, and reviewing. These authors maintain that as epistemic beliefs develop from absolutism to evaluativism, they are likely to translate to constructivist coaching approaches. Specifically, coaches who operate from a position of epistemic evaluativism (i.e., hold the view that knowledge is complex, tentative and can be constructed by the 'knower') would favour approaches which emphasise understanding the learner's starting point and goals and which encourage the learner to be active in structuring their own learning and understanding (Christian et al., 2019). For example, in certain contexts the coach may construct learning activities where no clear solution is immediately identifiable with a view to developing self-analysis, decision making and reflection. Use of divergent questions and delayed or bandwidth feedback would support learning and encourage the learner to develop independent,

autonomous and personalised solutions to movement problems (Collins et al., 2015; Grecic et al., 2013).

Despite research evidence linking well-developed personal epistemology to advanced coaching behaviours and the inherent benefit this carries regarding quality of coaching, other researchers (Ashford et al., 2025; Light, 2008; Partington & Cushion, 2013; Stodter & Cushion, 2019) discuss the notion of an 'epistemological gap,' the dissonance between beliefs about learning and coaching actions, within sports coaches and physical education teachers. Specifically, Partington and Cushion (2013) identified low levels of self-awareness among top-level soccer coaches who, despite espousing intentions to develop "whole" and "decision-making" players in their role as a "facilitator of knowledge creation," were actually observed to utilise high levels of prescriptive instruction, an approach associated with an absolutist conception of knowledge (see also Ashford et al., 2025). These authors argued that a core purpose of coach education is to close this gap. A well-developed personal epistemology may be one means by which such epistemic gaps may be closed, ultimately enhancing the quality of coaching practice.

Christian et al. (2023) described, through case study, the development of the epistemic beliefs of a renowned Adventure Sports Coach (ASC) through the lens of the TIDE framework. These authors concluded that personal epistemology theory has considerable potential in coach learning, specifically by: (i) encouraging trainees to invest time exploring formative experiences of sport, education, coaching, and their personal sociocultural world; (ii) exploring beliefs about sports coaching as a domain of knowledge in and of itself; and (iii) encouraging coaches to embrace knowledge about sports coaching as complex, tentative, and uncertain from the start of their development. Given that a well-developed personal epistemology is advantageous for coaches (Barry et al., 2023; Christian et al., 2023; Melhuish & Ryan, 2024) and ultimately the learners they support, it follows that investing effort in advancing the epistemic beliefs of trainee coaches is likely to be a fruitful endeavour.

Given the many demands upon coaches as they develop knowledge of their craft (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Wood et al., 2024), it is important to establish an efficient method by which the topic of personal epistemology might be effectively integrated into coach learning (i.e., how and by whom). In terms of by whom, one potential avenue lies with the coach developer. Described as an 'umbrella' term for those involved in coach education, tutoring, mentoring and assessing, coach developers have the capacity to influence a large number of coaches (Campbell et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2024; Stodter & Cushion, 2019). Partington et al. (2022) advocated that coach developers require specific training to support them in developing comprehensive knowledge of learning and pedagogy. Partington et al. demonstrated the value of a continuing professional development (CPD) course, focussed on understanding and implementing learning, in aligning coach developers espoused theories (what people say they do) and theories-in-use (what they actually do). Tailored CPD would seem an efficacious approach for coach developers to engage with the concept of personal epistemology and its role in coaching.

Narrative inquiry and narrative pedagogy

One approach to CPD with the potential to meaningfully impact coach developers learning about complex topics such as personal epistemology is narrative pedagogy: a contemporary theory of learning, education and social interaction informed by the principles of narrative inquiry (McMahon et al., 2018). As a psycho-socio-cultural approach grounded in the examination of stories, narrative inquiry holds that humans actively construe meaning from experience and communicate those experiences to the world by formulating and sharing stories shaped by the narratives available within our culture (Everard et al., 2022; Frank, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009a; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). As Everard et al. (2024) explain, narratives are perceived of as both personal and social insofar they *"act as socio-cultural templates onto which individuals map their personal stories*" (p.3). As such, narratives have the potential to illuminate personal and social experiences by acting as a vehicle to which we attach meaning, allowing us to make sense of our lives (Smith & Sparkes,

2009a). Given the potential performative capacity of narratives to 'do things' to people (Everard et al., 2024), we propose that sharing narratives about the role of personal epistemology in sports coaching may have the potential to generate meaningful insights for coach developers to 'map' their own epistemology, and employ this map to frame how they think about and orchestrate coach development (Frank, 2010).

In an extension to narrative inquiry, narrative pedagogy can be defined as an approach to education focused on facilitating meaning-making through deep conversations and individual reflection prompted by stimulating stories (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Specifically, Goodson & Gill (2011) refer to a "spiral of construction and reconstruction" (p. 123) which can generate new understandings of the issue in contention and lead to meaningful change for individuals and groups (McMahon & Smith, 2016) . McMahon et al. (2018) describe these three-stages of the narrative pedagogy process as: Narration: preparing and sharing narratives of an individual's lived experience (e.g., text-based stories); Collaboration: narratives are examined, questions and challenges are posed in a collaborative manner in order to better understand the lived experience; and Location: links are made between the narrator's story to the individual's story, locating in their wider contexts including social and cultural practices.

The present study

An increased understanding of personal epistemology has the potential to advance coach developers' practice by encouraging them to explore and develop the beliefs that underpin the actions of the coaches they support which, ultimately, may lead to more considered and adapted coaching. As such, the primary aim of this study was to understand what coach developers took away from a CPD process focused on personal epistemology. In addition, given the potential for narrative pedagogy to communicate complex information and facilitate meaning making with respect to a practitioner's role and context, a second aim was to explore the value of narrative pedagogy as a form of CPD for experienced practitioners. Although presented separately, these aims

are considered to be inextricably intertwined. That is, one aim (learning about personal epistemology) happens through and by the other (narrative pedagogy).

Method

Philosophical beliefs and methodology

This study was conducted from an interpretive constructionist perspective. As such, our approach is characterised by ontological relativism (the belief that reality is mind-dependent, multiple and created), and epistemological constructionism (knowledge is socially constructed and subjective [Everard et al., 2024]). Thus, we posit that knowledge, experience and insights are constructed socially through the reciprocal sharing of stories and resultant dialogic exchange. In line with Kvale and Brinkman's (2009) traveller metaphor, our focus groups allowed us to ask questions and invite participants to tell their own stories, the meaning of which unfolded throughout the focus group. Knowledge was therefore socially constructed, both between the focus group convenor and participants, and between participants themselves.

In line with our research philosophy, it was important to also consider our own positionality and the impact that we, as researchers, had on the research process. The first author is involved in coaching and coach development both in higher education and national governing body contexts. His research interests are in developmental epistemology. As such, his insider status allowed him to build rapport with participants based on common ground and credence within the community. The second author is involved in coach development in the context of a MSc programme and with national governing body of sport qualifications. In this capacity, he helps coaches to explore how their underpinning values and beliefs influence their actions as a means to focus and accelerate their development. The third author is a qualitative researcher in the field of sport and exercise psychology and is also a sports coach.

Participants

Having gained institutional ethical approval, criterion-based sampling was used to recruit coach developers from a single UK sporting National Governing Body, British Canoeing (BC[1]). Our rationale for using a homogenous sample was based on narrative pedagogy advocating for reciprocation and deep dialogue. Such dialogue is facilitated by an 'cultural insider' with 'embodied and contextual understanding' of the subject matter (Everard et al., 2022); as a BC coach developer, the first author was well placed to facilitate the process and build the relationships which are fundamental to successful narrative pedagogy (McMahon et al., 2023). To ensure 'levelness', experience and currency, participants were sampled on the following criteria: (a) they identified as a coach developer, (b) as a minimum they were a BC 'Coach Award' (Ofqual level 3) programme tutor with (c) a minimum of two years' experience delivering this award, (d) they had delivered this programme within the last six months and (e) were willing to participate in intellectually challenging CPD over multiple sessions. An email invitation was sent by the first author through the governing body to the 73 BC tutors who met these criteria; 16 coach developers ($n^{female} = 4$) with a mean age of 49.7 (range 35-62) years, were recruited via email invitation sent by the first author through the governing body. Participants provided informed consent; they had an average of 22.9 years coaching experience (range 7-37 years) and 14.6 years (range 3-34 years) experience as a coach developer. Throughout the results, participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Procedure

In order to maximise the potential of the narrative pedagogy process, predefined learning intentions which related to the nature and application of personal epistemology were established: (1) Develop a deep understanding of how our beliefs about coaching knowledge drive our coaching actions; (2) Recognise that beliefs develop through identifiable stages (absolutism to evaluativism) and are influenced by sociocultural factors; (3) Understand that well-developed epistemic beliefs consider

[1] In the time since initial planning and participant recruitment, British Canoeing has subsequently been renamed Paddle UK

knowledge about coaching as complex, tentative and personally constructed through enquiry and reason; (4) Apply this knowledge to your work as a coach developer.

Guided by the premise that narrative inquiry conceives of humans as storytellers who, by sharing stories make sense of and communicate our experiences (Everard et al., 2022), two video narratives were constructed by reworking the themes from Christian et al. (2023). Similarly to Everard et al. (2022), video as opposed to text-based narratives were used as the method of communication as a multi-sensory representation was thought to be more visually appealing, emotive and thus more impactful. The narrative videos were developed in conjunction with, and narrated by, Doug Cooper, the expert case from Christian et al. (2023).

The first video narrative, '*How my beliefs about knowledge have developed, and how they influence my coaching',* highlighted aspects of developmental epistemology and the role of sociocultural influences. For example, Doug told the story of how his parents (key influences) built a stile at the end of their garden which afforded him the opportunity for exploration, freedom and independence. This early experience was fundamental in developing Doug's evaluativist beliefs about personally constructed knowledge in a messy and disorganised world. This video narrative lasted approximately 11 minutes. In the second video, '*My paradigm shift*', Doug told the story of his return to education later in life. He recounted how, when presenting his 'model of coaching' to tutors and peers, he had an 'epiphany moment' where he lost faith in what he was presenting. He subsequently described coaching as being 'too messy and complex' to put into boxes and advocated a holistic, rather than reductive, approach to coach education which should be underpinned by 'embracing messiness', accepting uncertainty, and the development of a philosophy of coaching. This video illustrated epistemological aspects of knowledge as subjective, tentative and uncertain (messy, complex), as opposed to simple, certain and objective. This video narrative lasted 9 minutes. Transcripts of both narratives are available in supplementary file A.

Doug's story illuminates the experiences of one coach developer and how their personal epistemology changed over time. Thus, Doug's story might be viewed as a biographical master narrative (McLean et al. 2017). Master narratives are stories which are known by the majority, serve the purpose of defining acceptable and valued frameworks, and often conform to cultural expectations, while biographic master narratives provide a framework for how life should unfold (i.e., life event timings [McLean & Syed, 2015]). Using such a narrative to prompt discussion and learning holds many strengths; for example, master narratives are culturally specific, familiar stories which help put participants at ease – especially with complex subject matter – and provide 'hooks' to facilitate their connecting with each other. Yet we were also aware that master narratives can limit narrative pluralism by reducing access to alternative storylines and different ways of developing personal epistemology (Sparkes et al., 2012). Consequently, in the stages of narrative pedagogy that follow, we were cautious not to present Doug's story as the only available story, but instead to view his story as a catalyst to other stories shared among participants.

In the first stage of the narrative pedagogy process (narration), the video narratives were shared with participants ahead of the first focus groups so they could absorb the two stories in a manner and time of their choosing. Each narrative was accompanied by an online 'initial reactions' form designed to capture preliminary 'real time' responses to the video and help participants to think with the narratives ahead of the first focus group. Example questions included *'What are the main things that you took away from this story?', 'Did anything in the story surprise you, or make you think differently about something' and 'Do you agree with Doug that coaches operate in a world where knowledge about coaching is complex and messy?*' Responses were collated by the first author and used to provide insight and guide questions in the main data collection.

In the second stage (collaboration), participants were randomly organised into three groups and invited to attend the first of two focus groups. Focus groups were chosen primarily for their capacity to generate dynamic dialogue through collective interaction, and their suitability for the exploration

of novel concepts (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Thus, focus groups are well placed to support meaning making through deep dialogic exchange, a guiding principle of narrative pedagogy (Goodson & Gill, 2011). All focus groups were facilitated by the first author using Microsoft Teams.

The primary purpose of the first focus groups was to build rapport with participants and establish an environment which mitigated the influence of power dynamics, and encouraged the sharing of information (Everard et al., 2022). These focus groups also sought to allow participants to develop a deeper understanding of the narratives by exchanging views and ideas with others. As such, these focus groups sought to provide the first 'layer' of learning in the narrative pedagogy journey.

Although largely unstructured, the first focus groups followed a similar format in that participants were initially asked to share and discuss their general views about the narratives and debate various aspects within them. For example, participants were asked how they felt about Doug's perspective that coach development should be a holistic, rather than reductionist endeavour. These initial discussions were supported by the facilitator referring to participants responses on the initial reactions forms. Subsequently, more focussed questions were posed; for example, given that much of the first narrative focussed on the link between Doug's beliefs about coaching knowledge and his coaching actions, participants were asked if they could think of examples of how a belief they held informed their coaching actions. As such, participants were encouraged to share their own stories in light of the narratives provided. The initial round of three focus groups lasted between 125- 135 minutes and were video recorded.

Given the complexity of personal epistemology and its application to coaching the first author produced a supporting video entitled: '*Personal epistemology for coach developers.'* This video was viewed by the research team as the 'pedagogical component' (i.e., learning about) of the narrative pedagogy/ CPD process, and extends other narrative pedagogy designs which have favoured the sharing information with participants during data collection interactions by PowerPoint (Everard et al., 2022; Everard et al., 2024) or by sharing academic literature (McMahon et al., 2018). This

approach also extends the boundaries of narrative pedagogy designs in that participants could engage with and digest subject matter in a manner of their choosing. Our thinking here was guided by Goodson and Gills's (2011) contention of the need for narrative pedagogy to create space (time) for learners to navigate the chaos of learning by developing thematic and conceptual understanding and insight. Our staged approach also extends previous narrative pedagogy designs which have facilitated all three stages of the narrative pedagogy process (narration, collaboration, location) in one continuous 'sitting' (Everard et al., 2022; Everard et al., 2024; McMahon et al., 2018).

The video used the first author's position as a cultural insider to communicate content in an accessible manner using shared language and applied examples. In terms of epistemology theory, the video focussed on definitions, the concept of belief-action links, developmental stages, the role of sociocultural influences in the development of beliefs, and coaching knowledge as complex and tentative. The video ended by asking participants to reflect on the content in light of their experience as a coach developer and asked specific priming questions; for example, "*have you ever worked with absolutists, multiplists or evaluativists? How would you identify them*?" The 35-minute video (available from the first author on request) was made using the video recording function in PowerPoint and shared via MS Teams.

In the final stage (location), participants attended a second focus group which had two primary aims. Firstly, to understand if participants' thinking about the narratives, their own personal epistemology, or their work as a coach developer had changed following their engagement with and reflection on the video and preceding activities. Secondly, to understand the extent to which participants valued narrative learning as a form of CPD. As with the first focus groups, sessions were largely unstructured and free flowing, but punctuated with some pre-planned questions; for example, '*Have you ever worked with absolutists, multiplists or evaluativists', ' 'How did this shape your decisions/actions as a coach developer*' and '*What are your thoughts about CPD done in this way?*'.

These focus groups lasted between 125-130 minutes. In total data collected included 6 focus groups, attended by 16 participants, which totalled 10.5 hours of discussion.

Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the initial reaction forms and focus groups dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA was judged to be the 'best fit' approach to address the central research question due to its methodological flexibility which can result in a rich, detailed and complex account of the data (Trainor & Bundon, 2020), usefulness when investigating under-researched areas (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and capacity to identify patterns of meaning within and across data in relation to participants' lived experiences (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In accordance with RTA's requirement for the researcher to enact an active and reflexive stance so as to thoughtfully engage with the data and analytical process, the process of doing the RTA followed several stages resulting in the generation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Trainor & Bundon, 2020).

To begin, the first author spent a prolonged period of time immersing himself in the data by listening and relistening to the video recordings, whilst simultaneously editing, reading and re-reading the transcripts. This stage also involved reading and re-reading participants initial reaction forms, referring back to field notes and to the first author's reflexive journal. Due to the nature of the narrative pedagogy approach, the data were analysed in a fluid and recursive manner (e.g., chronologically by individual focus group, temporally by initial collaboration stage and subsequent post-epistemology video location stage, by topic and by individual) to create a holistic appreciation of the dataset. Initially, the data were read inductively (e.g., coach developers' lived experiences) and then deductively (e.g., listening to participant responses in light of personal epistemology theory). Such dialectic movement between the personal experience and the theoretical explanation has been termed abductive reasoning (Ryba et al., 2012).

Next, initial codes were created in an attempt to capture significant meanings of the dataset as they related to the research question (Everard et al., 2022). The analysis utilised a mix of latent and

semantic coding to generate tentative initial theme names which were subsequently organised, reorganised and mapped around a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Acting in their role as critical friends, intermittent engagement with the second and third author allowed for continual reflection and the iterative development of themes. In the final stages of analysis, writing multiple drafts of the results allowed for themes to be reviewed, collapsed and refined. Similarly to Everard et al. (2022), the analytic procedure concluded with the formulation of an overall story of the dataset within the themes presented.

Quality of the research

Guided by a relativist approach for judging the rigour of qualitative research (Everard et al., 2024; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), several quality indicators were considered which suit the particular needs of the research. First, we propose the research to be worthy in relation to both Jones et al.'s (2024) call for research leading to a more nuanced understanding of the coach developer, and Christian et al.'s (2023) emphasis on the integration of contemporary models of personal epistemology into the sports coaching literature. Second, the coherence of the study was considered by addressing Oliver-Álvarez et al.'s (2024) call to maximise the impact of narrative research by translating findings into narrative pedagogy interventions and by extending the approach by paying particular attention to the pedagogical aspect of the research design. Third, we consider the research to be transparent based on the lead researcher assuming and maintaining a reflexive stance during the data collection and analysis, and by utilising discussion and feedback from critical friends throughout. These critical friend discussions acted as a theoretical sounding board, debating the case made in relation to the data generated and embracing the different positions of the research team (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Finally, this study also included an information-rich sample, prolonged, in-depth data collection, and aligned with recent guidance for research in narrative pedagogy (McMahon et al., 2022).

Results and discussion

Thematic analysis resulted in the development of four sequentially linked, progressive themes. The central organising concept for these themes was that the participants found the content of personal epistemology, delivered via narrative pedagogy, acted as a stimulus on their thought process and practice in a variety of ways. That is, the stimulus referred to in the theme titles is the combination of the content of personal epistemology and narrative pedagogy as the mode of delivery.

A stimulus for connection

In line with Goodson and Gill's (2011) work, participants outlined how narrative pedagogy moved beyond the narration of stories and acted as a stimulus for connection when discussing personal epistemology. Narrative pedagogy worked to connect participants to specific aspects of the story, to general meanings or sensations, as well as connecting to others in the group. Thus, narrative pedagogy connected both on an intrapersonal level (i.e., the story resonates with *my* experiences) as well as on an interpersonal level (i.e., the story prompts *shared* discussions with the group).

On an intrapersonal level, participants described feeling connected to Doug's story. As Frank (2010) puts it, stories can get under our skin. People do not simply listen to stories but get caught up in them. As Dave described:

> I felt that I was immediately hooked into the story because there was a feeling of real empathy from almost the beginning…so even before there was the need to respond, I was enjoying the tales and definitely felt that there were parallels that I could relate to.

In line with narrative pedagogy, Dave was able to 'locate' the story, and this allowed him to connect. For Dave this connection occurred naturally; the story was located in what Frank (2010, p55) might call his 'inner library'. This inner library draws our attention to stories that are familiar, and which can be readily located in our own experiences. Indeed, participants highlighted that it was this familiarity, particularly with Doug's early childhood experiences, which connected them to Doug's

story, suggesting “My story is very similar to Doug’s” (Mike) and “I had a very similar childhood to Doug’s” (Alice). Yet this wasn’t the case for all participants. In particular, Chris described:

> I'd say I probably didn't have that connection. I naturally find it quite challenging watching that 10-minute clip, because if you don't know the person and you're not there with them…if I'd have known Doug, I’d have attached lots of emotions to him and to what he was saying behind it. But I didn't get that quite as much as I think other people probably did.

Chris’s experience of Doug’s story was uncommon in the groups and illustrates that not all participants experience connection. In explaining this lack of connection Chris raises two important points: first that Doug was unknown to him and second that Doug was not present in the group. His description highlights that in order to feel connected to the story, he needed to feel connected to Doug. Frank (2010) writes that stories work to make characters available as ‘generalisable resources’ that listeners use to engage in work on their own character. Yet in Chris’s case, the character seemed unavailable and disconnected, thereby resulting in less engagement. For this reason, practitioners using narrative pedagogy would benefit from checking the resonance of narratives with all participants and preparing methods to bolster that connection for anyone struggling.

On an interpersonal level, participants described how engaging in the focus groups provided a sense of relief. As Sally explains:

> I’m glad it’s not just my own coaching that’s messy! I was always worried that everyone else seemed to have boxes for theirs. So, my main takeaway from that narrative is that it’s great we are talking about it and recognising it and looking to embrace it.

Although Sally clearly connected to the content within the narratives, it is the interaction with fellow coach developers which provided her with a sense of assurance. In this instance, the narratives acted for Sally by mitigating feelings of isolation, promoting mutual resonance and bringing her into relationships with others (Frank, 2013). As Goodson & Gill (2011) explain, narrative learning has

particular benefit when people begin to appreciate, they are part of the "common stream of humanity" (p.67) and that their problems are generally problems that confront everyone.

Additionally, coach developers connected to concepts related to personal epistemology. For example, Sam connected with Doug's conception of embracing the messiness and chaos of coaching:

> So yeah, I fully concur that coaching is messy, and I'm constantly questioning what I'm doing. I'm always, you know, *'is this the right thing for the learner, is it the right time, the right approach*'? So, uncertainty is something that I just embrace, and I also believe that, you know, everything is messy or everything is chaotic, like the environment we send people into is chaotic, humans are inherently messy and chaotic. The process of learning is messy and chaotic, so it's just… chaos abounds, right? And, what we try to do as coach developers, is try to give people tools to, not necessarily control the chaos, but kind of operate within that chaotic environment.

Sam's connection to coaching as messy and chaotic is indicative of an evaluativist epistemology insofar it infers a conception of coaching knowledge as complex, tentative and uncertain (Barzilai & Eshet-Alkalai, 2015). Additionally, by making links to broader social and cultural contexts of learning, the coaching environment and human nature, Sam goes further than just connecting to the narrative; he is also able to locate the story within his own practice as a coach developer and speculate on how he helps others to develop (e.g., by giving them tools to operate within the chaos [Everard et al., 2022]).

Whilst the notion of coaching as messy and chaotic (complex, tentative, uncertain) resonated with participants, there was a divergence of opinion about how this might translate into working with trainees. As Charlie describes:

> I agree with Sally, I love the thought of embracing the chaos, but I think it's so big and it's so complex. People come to us wanting these absolute answers, but they're also coming to us

> very green and almost at the point where they haven't really sussed out command style instruction yet. And to throw in all this other stuff in a sort of organic chaotic way can definitely be… overwhelming. So, you've got to have something, I guess, to hang that chaos on to.

Although Charlie accepts the idea of encouraging new coaches to embrace the complexities of coaching (an inherently evaluativist perspective [Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002]), he fears this perspective may be overwhelming for those who have yet to develop foundational knowledge of coaching. Charlie advocates for a progressive approach whereby a foundational, more absolutist, conception provides the framework to 'hang' more complex concepts. Narrative pedagogy has worked for Charlie by both stimulating a connection to the narratives and epistemology theory, and also by encouraging him to consider their practical application. That is, Charlie has located his learning into his work as a coach developer (Goodson & Gill, 2011). In conclusion, this theme highlights the value of narrative pedagogy as a form of CPD through its capacity to provide evocative stimuli that created meaningful connections to narratives and each other. That is, participants were able to join with the story and interpret it from their own vantage point, feel its nuances and experience it affecting their own lives (Frank, 2013). Furthermore, it emphasises the value seen by these experienced coach developers in epistemology theory, specifically the nature of knowledge as complex and tentative and the implications this has for their practice.

A stimulus for meaning making

This theme encapsulates how the layered nature of narrative pedagogy enabled participants to actively construct meanings of the nature of epistemology and its role in coaching on the foundation of the narratives, the precepts of epistemology theory and their experiences as coach developers. The theme is underpinned by Smith and Sparkes (2009b) notion that *"meaning is basic to being human and being human entails actively construing meaning"* (p.3).

Narrative pedagogy stimulated coach developers to construct new meanings both on a personal level (i.e., of themselves) and of their role as a coach developer. In terms of meaning making on a personal level, when discussing the narrative in which Doug talks about how significant others have shaped his beliefs about coaching, Dave reflected on his own experiences of his relationship with his father:

> The big thing I keep coming back to is those massive influences in my past …the best analogy I can give is it's like a magnet and I'm a piece of iron trying to move away from that magnetic pull but there are times where it just pulls me right back again. And I'll give you the exact example… my father; a huge character in our family, huge character in the town, massive influence on me. A complete absolutist. You know, a builder. Never time to coach you. Just to tell you how to do it, and he was very efficient. And try as I might, I will pull away from that and reflect away from that and think deeply. And you know, I'd like to think I've evolved. But I know there are times when I just come whamming back to it, you know, and I think it's good for me to know that. I think this [focus] group, this has really forced me to reflect and think and identify that, and not be ashamed of it, but accept that that's sort of part of who I am. And when I dig really deep, this is something I bring to my career in coaching.

Muis et al. (2006) propose that in the formative years, general epistemic beliefs are largely shaped in the social context; in Dave's instance, by his father. Narrative pedagogy provided Dave with the understanding by which to characterise his father as an epistemological absolutist and describe his evolution from that position and accept his experiences as part of his identity. Oliver-Álvarez et al. (2024) argue that when a person is emotionally involved in a story, they become more responsive to and persuaded by its content. Evidently, Doug's story had a deep emotive influence on Dave, initially causing him conflict but ultimately resolution and a new meaning of himself and his epistemology. Additionally, Dave's experience highlights the reciprocity of epistemic beliefs between different

domains (Merk et al., 2018; Muis et al., 2006), in this case between general 'life domain' beliefs and the domain of sports coaching. Such reciprocity supports Christian et al.'s (2023) contention that those interested in developing the personal epistemology of trainee coaches should take time to explore formative experiences in a range of social contexts (school, sport, family) to understand how these underpin beliefs about coaching.

Narrative pedagogy also stimulated meaning making among participants in their role as coach developers. For example, in his second focus group, Sam explains how the personal epistemology video stimulated thinking about how epistemic beliefs drive coaching behaviours:

> I think my biggest take away was…to change what a coach does, you must change what they know, which requires a change in beliefs. I think that was my biggest take away, it's that kind of linkage there...between the doing, the knowing, and the believing. We're often trying to change what the coach does on this end, right? That's what we're in the business of; adjusting and modifying their actions. And that's often quite challenging to do, particularly if they're rooted in their beliefs and because of that, there might be an unwillingness to change and you know, and that kind of, a links up to the next bit of both the structure of knowledge and the certainty of knowledge, if they're on the simple or certain side it's really difficult to make that change happen. And so, for me, it was kind of an 'A-ha' moment, it just made sense.

In this example, Sam connects the idea of intransigent beliefs to the absolutist perspective of knowledge as simple and certain (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997), thus showing an accurate application of epistemology theory. Thus narrative pedagogy has enabled Sam to process information from the narratives and video and take on board a new perspective he had never previously considered (Frank, 2010). As Sam says, '*it just made sense'*.

In addition to participants making new meanings about particular aspects of the materials presented, others, such as Angus, go further by reconceptualising his role as a coach developer:

> OK, so I really liked that journey of absolutism to multiplism to evaluativism, so I guess you've got, like, an absolutist who encounters reality, gets a bit sad for a while, and ideally emerges wiser and humbler and maybe a little bit more pragmatic. And I feel like, that journey… I see that loads. And going back to you Alice, I think it was yourself, talking about '*what's our purpose as developers*?', I feel actually my main purpose is to hold their hands through that hard bit of, of going from rules, a rules-based reality to context.

In this example, Angus is mindful of the emotionally unnerving nature of moving from a 'rules-based' (absolutist) conception of coaching knowledge to a context-driven, subjective (evaluativist) one (Barzilai & Eshet-Alkalai, 2015). He goes on to reflect on an earlier exchange with Alice to conceptualise his role as one of emotional support (i.e. holding their hand) to the absolutist and guiding them to emerge as 'wiser' and 'humbler' pragmatists. As such, Narrative pedagogy provided Angus with a framework to locate his understanding of personal epistemology into his work as a coach developer and make meaning of his role in the process (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Although several researchers have proposed that epistemic beliefs develop within educational encounters through a process of cognitive disequilibrium and subsequent realignment (e.g., Bendixen & Rule, 2004; Muis et al., 2006), there is scope for further research into the social and emotional role of the educator within such encounters.

Overall, we contend that narrative pedagogy acted to evoke, compel and stimulate participants to develop new meanings of personal epistemology on a personal level, on the level of *what* they do as a coach developer and on the level of *how* they do it as a coach developer. Given the complexity of personal epistemology as a multifaceted philosophical construct and the nature of the participants as a practically minded, non-academic audience, the ability to create meaning from the materials presented should not be undervalued and highlights the value and appropriateness of narrative pedagogy in communicating complex information in an accessible way. As Smith & Sparkes (2009b) explain, narratives act as vehicles through which we create, communicate, and fill our world with

meaning. This is because meanings are not stable properties to be discovered, but rather are constructed, modified and ultimately, as Frank (2010) proposes, act as guidance systems which help people to understand who we are and as such, help us make sense of the "blooming buzzing confusion" (p.30)

Narrative pedagogy stimulates new ideas

This theme describes how the narratives and pedagogical discussions stimulated reciprocal exchange between participants resulting in discernible new ideas and ways of thinking. The theme exemplifies the deeply social process of narrative pedagogy and highlights the value of collaborative dialogue in the generation of new ideas (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Laura exemplifies the theme by explaining how collaborating with others acted as the catalyst for developing new ideas which no individual could have had in isolation:

> In terms of impact…watching the videos... I don't think anything particularly new was in there. I think that it was kind of like, 'Yep, no, yep, yep, yep'. But it's this conversation that matters; it's conversations like this that make learning and thinking happen. And just getting other people's thoughts and opinions. There's been a lot of *'somebody said something and somebody else has built on it and somebody else has built on that'*, and no one of us would have had that chain of thought without the other one saying something.

To demonstrate how iterative exchanges culminated in new thinking and ideas, upon hearing Doug's story of 'embracing the messiness,' participants entered into a discussion about how as coach developers they actively model uncertainty (i.e., 'not knowing') to their trainees. As Mike explained:

> I totally believe that telling them '*It's OK to be rubbish'* is something is a message that we don't convey enough. We're throwing all this stuff at them, and it's totally OK to be bad with it. And to actually take the time to say: '*Look*, *here's something that I'm not quite so good*

> *at'*. And just coming back to that thing that Peter and Alan mentioned earlier, just be humble with it and highlight the fact that we don't always know, and we don't always do it right.

Mike's notion of 'being bad with it' and 'not always knowing' is indicative of modelling a well-developed epistemological position by viewing knowledge of coaching as uncertain and tentative (Schommer, 1998). Mike goes on to associate the idea of not knowing with being humble, a characteristic shared among high-level adventure sports coaches (Christian et al., 2017). Subsequently, Sam picks up on Mike's concept of humility and builds on the conversation by linking it to his ideas of modelling uncertainty by demonstrating vulnerability to learners:

> So, when you talk about humbleness and things like that, it's expressing vulnerability. And I think once you're in that space of evaluativism like, you have to be that person. You have to *be* vulnerable because you just have to embody the fact that knowledge is constantly changing and evolving and you're existing in this kind of soup that's spinning around, and you have to operate in that space. And I think that that just embodying that is something that might help people move from that absolutism forward because you're giving them, you know, a model, if you will. A behavioural model of what this (evaluativism) looks like.

In this example, Sam builds on Mike's ideas and goes on to offer his view that that modelling uncertainty has the potential to help make sense of the constantly changing and evolving 'soup' of coaching and facilitate the development of absolutist beliefs towards an evaluativist perspective. Subsequently, Dave returns to Mike's original idea to question the point in a coach's development that uncertainty should be introduced:

> I just wonder whether our modelling needs to evolve as we're with our trainee coaches. If we go in from the get-go into, you know, Mike, that '*we are humble and we haven't got all the answers'*. Is there a risk that at that stage of their development they're going to think *'For ***** sake I wanted answers and this guy's telling me he hasn't got any'*. Whereas

> when we've won their trust, you know, that's when we're allowed to sort of let the cat out the bag and say, you know guys, '*it ain't quite like that….*'

This example highlights how narrative pedagogy stimulated the reciprocal sharing of thoughts and ideas (modelling uncertainty) that resulted in new – and nuanced – ideas of the concept. It also reflects a solid understanding of epistemology theory (e.g., knowledge as tentative/uncertain and developmental stages) and highlights that participants are taking away new understandings from the process. Furthermore, the ability to analyse and apply epistemological concepts to their work as coach developers indicates the higher-order thinking skills of participants and the value of narrative pedagogy as a stimulus to move beyond basic comprehension of the subject matter. Overall, this theme exemplifies Goodson and Gill's (2011) contention of how the collaborative endeavour of "intense conversation, dialogue, questioning negotiating meaning and critical interpretive interpretation" (p.127) assists in navigating the 'maze' of often competing meanings and understandings. Goodson and Gill (2011) refer to this as "the most chaotic part of the process" but one that, when successfully navigated, can result in new understandings and interpretations of events.

Narrative pedagogy as a stimulus for change

This final theme describes how narrative pedagogy stimulated participants by enabling them to create links between the stories presented, the pedagogical video, collaborative discussions and the wider context of their professional practice which, ultimately resulted in the intention to change some aspect of their professional practice (Everard et al., 2024).

Although participants readily shared ideas for change, they also highlighted how the concept was unnerving. As Dave, a seasoned coach developer with 28 years' experience explained:

> I've got a course coming up in a week's time with a group of racing coaches. And right now, I'm scared shitless, and actually, this CPD has just made me more scared because I'm going

> to go at this next course in a slightly different way. And I like to be a man with a plan, but I'm going to brave up and do things differently. And I think what I'm going to do is spend more effort and time at the very beginning to probe a little back with everybody. So, this whole thing about past influences, *'what has affected your beliefs in terms of how you coach?,'* and what I need to be prepared to do then is adapt what I then present over the two days.

Evidently, the notion of how sociocultural factors influence the development of epistemic beliefs (Muis et al., 2006) resonated with Dave. Specifically, he is taking action by further profiling the learners on the course to enable him to better adapt the course to suit their individual needs. Such actions are essential evidence of bridging the knowledge-practice gap, evidence which is lacking in many coach development courses which impact knowledge more than behaviours (Stodter & Cushion, 2019). However, for other participants, change is a work in progress and their ideas are not fully formed as Dave's. As Angus describes:

> So short-term, it's about changing an e-mail and thinking about what the questions should be to inform me of where they're at on that absolutist to evaluativist spectrum. And in the long-term, it's… can I reframe lots of coaching questions about our beliefs about knowledge and who we are as people, rather than our beliefs about learning? Which will be an interesting idea to play with. It's a fluffy idea though because I haven't thought about it yet. I need to sit down and put some words around it.

In this example, Angus describes how he intends to develop questions to gain a deeper understanding of his learners' epistemology. He feels understanding learners' beliefs about knowledge will help him situate learning about coaching within the realm of human nature, rather than as an academic exercise. Perhaps most notable here is Angus' intention to 'play' with a 'fluffy idea.' Although he has a firm grasp of developmental epistemology (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002), Angus' idea for change is not yet fully formed. McGannon et al. (2022) describe the pedagogical value of stories as 'entry points' for change which work differently for people and ultimately lead to

652 "new ways of living" (p. 942). As such, for Angus narrative pedagogy has provided an entry point,
653 however tangible change is still a work in progress.

654 Both Dave and Angus' ideas for change involve gaining insight into learners' epistemic beliefs
655 through use of questioning, with the view that a deeper understanding of learners will help situate
656 their work as developers. As such, their intentions for change are subtle and implicit. Other
657 participants favoured more explicit intentions for change, as Sophie describes:

658 > I think, having had these discussions, it would be useful for the coaches coming through to
659 > actually use these words, and for us to explain this stuff to them and be more explicit. So,
660 > Alice's questions might frontload the sessions, and Ian might draw out pieces of information,
661 > but I actually think sticking the labels on it… we shouldn't be frightened of having that
662 > explicit discussion, an open discussion in the room. Not necessarily sticking labels on anyone,
663 > just getting them to contemplate and appreciate it [personal epistemology].

664 Narrative pedagogy worked differently for Sophie in that she felt sufficiently strongly about the
665 value of the subject matter that she intends to explicitly integrate it through 'open discussion' into
666 her practice. Other participants share Sophie's more explicit approach and connected personal
667 epistemology with coaching philosophy (Cushion & Partington, 2016; Williams & Macnamara, 2021).
668 For example, Peter highlights his intention to change the way he delivers the Core Coach
669 programme: "I was thinking about introducing the philosophy session in significantly earlier… almost
670 right at the beginning but I think, avoiding the term philosophy, I think it turns people away but
671 using the term beliefs". Not only does Peter consider the topic significant enough to be addressed
672 from the start of the coach's development, but he also feels changing the terminology he uses from
673 'philosophy' to 'beliefs' is a better way to appeal to learners and engage with them.

674 Within their discussed intentions for change, the coach developers highlighted potential challenges
675 they might meet. For example, Joe raised the possibility of resistance from learners:

> One of the notes I wrote from the video was, *'If you want to change what the coach does, we need to change what they know and what they believe';* but how do we support that absolutist, you know, because they might not want to change, they might have absolutely no desire to change their belief structure. I think it could well be that the 'absolutist approach' is what they've seen be really effective, or they believe to be effective at their club, for example.

In this example, Joe is recognising a difficulty that might arise and seeking assistance from the group in addressing it. In response to Joe, Sam advocated a subtle, supportive approach of offering new ideas to encourage changes in thinking:

> I think one of the ways to help people move through (developmental stages) is just constantly confronting people with, you know, new evidence. But in a very kind of thoughtful and gentle way so that you don't kind of rip the rug out from underneath them. But that kind of gentle prodding of like '*Oh, have you considered this?*'

In summary, this concluding theme highlights the value of narrative pedagogy as a form of CPD in that participants were able to draw on their learning about personal epistemology (take aways) to discuss a range of intentions for change. As Oliver-Álvarez et al. (2024) state, the purpose of narrative pedagogy is to use stories to 'ambush' learners and promote change by exposing them to stories they might otherwise not hear and, as such, increase their inner library. Even with the more staggered implementation of narrative pedagogy within the present study in contrast to previous projects, it is perhaps not surprising that narrative pedagogy would result in ideas for change that are not yet fully formed given this "ambush" nature of narratives. Indeed, given Frank's (2010) contention that narrative research should provoke ongoing dialogue, it may even be desirable that change is a long-term process. It could be argued that identifying and discussing ideas for change is an appropriate outcome for a discrete CPD event for coach developers. Evidencing actual change may be better positioned within reaccreditation portfolios or as part of formal qualifications.

Practical implications

This study is the first to employ narrative pedagogy to educate coach developers about the role of personal epistemology in coaching. As such, it provides several practical implications for both coach developers and researchers. First, considering the reported value of learning about personal epistemology from the participants in this study, those responsible for the education and training of coach developers should engage with this topic as a means of gaining deeper understanding of how beliefs about knowledge of coaching underpin coaching behaviour. However, the conceptually and intellectually challenging nature of the subject matter raises concerns about the practicalities of coach developers facilitating meaningful dialogue around personal epistemology. Accordingly, we conclude that an insight into specifically targeted aspects of epistemology, including belief-led coaching actions, developmental stages, and the role of the sociocultural environment in the development of beliefs would provide sufficient depth to stimulate conversation amongst coaches and coach developers to draw meaning which may in turn foster enhanced coaching practice. Second, given the complexity of the subject matter, the design of CPD programmes which address this topic should be staged, contain a variety of stimuli, and create opportunities for learners to discuss and share ideas and to listen to others. Equally, coach developers should be supported in adopting a facilitative stance that encourages curiosity, openness and dialogue, rather than feeling the need to "teach" epistemology in a traditional sense. Third, researchers and practitioners that utilise narrative pedagogy should formulate predefined learning objectives, include a distinct 'pedagogical component', include priming activities that capture in-the-moment initial reactions to narratives, and take place over a period of time to allow thinking to develop and foster social connections.

Finally, we thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to consider the broader philosophical implications of coaches and coach developers engaging with personal epistemology. Although a full exploration of these issues lies beyond the scope of this manuscript, we recognise that future

scholarship may wish to grapple with more fundamental questions about whether – and to what extent – epistemic beliefs can or should be treated as "content" within coach education. Our intention within this study was not to position personal epistemology as a fixed body of knowledge, but to show how narrative pedagogy can create dialogic spaces in which coaches examine how their ways of knowing shape their practice. In this sense, our approach resists standardisation by foregrounding reflexivity, openness, and meaning-making rather than prescriptive instruction. As the field continues to explore the role of philosophy in coaching, there remains important work to be done in interrogating the political, cultural, and methodological implications of bringing epistemic inquiry into professional learning contexts.

Limitations and future research

Despite the original contributions of this study, future research would do well to address its limitations. First, we have focused specifically on personal epistemology within this study. Our decision to do so was based on the well-established literature on epistemology within the fields of psychology and education (Barzilai & Eshet-Alkalai, 2015; Merk et al., 2018; Muis et al., 2006, 2016), which may inform sports coaching. We acknowledge that other metaphysics (e.g., ontology) are also deserving attention in future research. In addition, we acknowledge the view of an anonymous reviewer that this work could be considered in light of other perspectives (e.g., through a social justice lens). Future research extending the current work would benefit from adopting a broader perspective. Second, as outlined in the method, this research relied on a master narrative of the epistemological development of a renowned coach. We are conscious that having access to a single narrative runs the risk of limiting narrative pluralism by 'locking' participants into the story and reducing their access to other narratives available in the cultural repertoire, which may work differently for them (Monforte et al., 2018). In this study, the use of focus groups may have mitigated against the prevalence of one dominant master narrative, but future research using one single voice as a catalyst for discussion might consider the type of story used. In this case we used a

narrative deemed familiar to participants, but group discussions might also be stimulated by previously unheard, marginalised, or deviant stories. Given the novelty of the developmental personal epistemology literature in the sports coaching domain, we have intentionally focused on personal epistemology as content (i.e., coach developers learning about epistemology). To support and extend this initial exploration, future research should focus on processes of epistemic change in coach development. A useful initial step would be to explore the barriers and facilitators encountered by coach developers and the coaches they support. Additionally, the theoretical implications of personal epistemology in relation to sports coaching merit further research attention. As noted in the introduction, the notion of domain-specific epistemology suggests that beliefs about knowledge in coaching may differ from those in other domains. A fruitful next step may be to explore how the specific epistemic structure of coaching underpins the development of knowledge within the domain. Finally, exploring the reciprocity and transfer of epistemic thinking between knowledge domains (e.g., culture, nature, politics) has potential to offer insights into how thinking and talking about beliefs regarding knowledge and knowing may shape personal epistemology within broader life contexts.

Conclusion

The nature and development of personal epistemology is an integral yet under-researched component of sports coaching which has the potential to lead to more considered coaching behaviours. Accordingly, in response to calls for research to integrate contemporary models of personal epistemology into coach development (Christian et al., 2023) and to maximise the impact of narrative research by translating findings into narrative pedagogy interventions (Oliver-Álvarez et al., 2024), this original research sought to examine a) what coach developers took away from narrative learning about personal epistemology, and b) the extent to which narrative pedagogy is a valuable form of CPD for coach developers. Our results show that personal epistemology was perceived to be a useful concept for experienced coach developers, and that narrative pedagogy was

776 an appropriate vehicle to enhance participants understanding of personal epistemology and its role
777 in coaching. In general, as reflected by the names of the themes and evidenced by their active
778 involvement and contribution of ideas, participants found the narrative pedagogy process to be a
779 stimulating and engaging exercise. Furthermore, participants found the narratives, personal
780 epistemology video, and pedagogical discussions to be meaningful and relevant in their role as coach
781 developers. More specifically, the progressive order of themes presented in the results shows firstly
782 that participants were able to create intrapersonal and interpersonal connections to the materials
783 presented. Subsequently, participants were able to actively construe meaning from the materials
784 and discussions and locate new meanings in their work as coach developers (Goodson & Gill, 2011;
785 Smith & Sparkes, 2009b). Consequently, through a process of reciprocal engagement, participants
786 were able to apply new understanding and meanings to discuss, explore, and develop new ideas
787 about their roles. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, participants were able to discuss how the
788 narrative pedagogy process inspired ideas for change in their future practice. As such, through
789 appropriately facilitated CPD for coach developers, contemporary theories of personal epistemology
790 can successfully inform the practice of coach.

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