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18 Minutes



Ten things I've learned from ten years of coach learning research



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What were you doing in 2010, and how has your perception of coaching changed since? Perhaps back then your Easter holiday plans were spoiled by ash from the volcanic eruption in Iceland. Maybe your hopes were dashed again as Fabio Capello's England football team crashed out of the World Cup, losing 4-1 to Germany with a controversial disallowed goal that reinforced the need for goal-line technology. Back then, I was looking forward to the London Olympic and Paralympic Games, beginning my PhD studies at Loughborough University and considering coaching from an academic perspective for the first time. I was exploring a new body of books, articles, and authors and comparing what I read with how I learned to coach football and rugby,

the experiences I'd had of being coached and of my qualification courses - and thinking back to floundering on the field when none of my practices worked as I'd hoped.

Understanding how coaches learn is a crucial part of helping them to develop more effectively, which can also enhance the quality of coaches and coaching as a profession. In line with this aspiration - and luckily for me in beginning to get my head around the topic - just over a decade ago UK Coaching (then Sports Coach UK) commissioned a review of all the available research on coach learning and development (Cushion et al. 2010). The review systematically analysed existing literature on coach learning as well as related topics

in education, health, business, and professional learning. All the findings were condensed in one document for the benefit of those leading the development of coaching. At the time, the seven co-authors remarked that coach learning was still developing as a legitimate area of research, with a lack of theoretically grounded and robust evidence to usefully apply in practice. More than a decade later, is this still the case? What's changed, and what have I learned about coach learning in a decade of researching, participating, lecturing and coaching?

1. Coaching and learning are complex

One of the first obstacles I came up against is that there is no agreed definition of learning, which makes it a tricky concept to be clear and simple about. How you understand learning depends on your worldview on the nature of reality and how we can know things, and the relationship of various actors (such as coaches) to the world. Just like coaching itself then, there is no one 'right way' to understand or approach coach learning. However, for some time it has generally been accepted that coaching is a complex socio-cultural endeavour, meaning that there are often competing and dynamic demands placed on coaches, influenced by layers of culture, tradition, and history.

I would summarise how research has progressed by suggesting that it has changed from describing coaches' learning in different situations, to attempting to explain the varied influences touched upon above (i.e.

social, cultural and historical). There is also a point to make about how we research and 'measure' coach learning. Consider this: not everything that can be counted in coach learning counts, and not everything that counts can be counted. What we focus on, observe, or measure has implications for our ability to draw useful conclusions from any investigation. Using a mixture of methods over time has potential for building a more complete understanding of the complexities of coaches' learning.

2. Coaches learn from a blend of experiences

This one might seem obvious, but research in the last decade has confirmed: coaches learn through a multitude of experiences that combine or blend through serendipity (i.e. by chance in a beneficial manner). Researchers have tended to separate out coaches' learning by investigating each different situation in which it takes place. For example, the 2010 review of coach learning literature followed the framework of formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities while other researchers have referred to mediated and unmediated learning.

Studies often look at one particular coach development programme or consider, say, mentoring, as one piece of the jigsaw puzzle of coaches' learning. This separating out of discrete components has certainly helped us discuss and organise our thinking, especially when the amount of published research about coach learning continues to multiply.

However, it is the blending rather than separation of learning experiences that is significant, and we still need to know more about how experiences combine to influence the overall picture of coaches' learning and development.

3. Show me the evidence

Twenty years ago, we had pretty much no evidence that formal learning situations (i.e. coach education courses) had any impact on coaches at all. The most thorough study available was with just one Canadian ice hockey coach, and it found only very small changes in the coach's knowledge and behaviours after attending a course (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999). Evidence that 'captured' learning from formal coach education together with the combined impact of more informal situations such as observing and reflecting on coaching experiences was hard to pin down. Not a lot has changed with the ability to be definitive about the impacts of coaches' learning, but thanks to more sophisticated research designs and some updated reviews we do have a slightly clearer picture of 'what works' in certain circumstances and how to find it. It often seemed that 'knowledge transfer' of sport-specific, technical and bioscientific content tended to lack relevance for coaches, whereas now it is increasingly recognised that a shift in focus is appropriate. Evidence suggests that helping coaches to actively construct knowledge through participatory social interaction and reflecting on how the context influences their practice, and learning, is valuable (e.g. Trudel, Milistetd & Culver, 2020).

4. Learner-centred approaches - a word of caution

The last 10 years has seen a lot of enthusiasm for person-centred or athlete-centred coaching. In coach development the equivalent 'learner-centred' approaches are often aligned with constructivist-informed theoretical ideas. For example, you might be more likely to encounter a coach education course that takes place 'in situ' at your club with a facilitator or even be part of a shared online 'social learning space', supporting you to make (i.e. construct) meaning of new content (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). However, there are often unacknowledged underpinnings and unintended consequences of well-intended 'learner-centred' actions. As an example, reflective practice is often recommended as wholly beneficial but recent research suggests it's effects can also limit and constrain coaches' thinking, reinforcing existing practice and power relations (Downham & Cushion, 2020). Overall, it is important to understand the theories informing different approaches to enable their effective application in different situations. There is still not a lot of evidence available to explain the effects of learner-centred initiatives on coaches' learning, or if they are indeed any better than what we did and had before.

5. Coach perceptions don't mirror their practice

You might be thinking that surely some of these more recent approaches to coach development are a much better route to go down in supporting coaches and their practice. Indeed, you may have enjoyed recent coach development and felt 'fully engaged' in your own learning.

My point here is based on the last 10 years of research: positive perceptions of learning are a poor proxy for developing knowledge, skills and behaviour. Coaches may overestimate what they have learnt from development situations and confuse short term 'performances', such as those needed to pass assessments, with meaningful and lasting change. In addition, coaches' self-awareness and insights into their own coaching have been shown to be poor: often not matching up to what they are observed doing 'in the field'. This is why I say, 'perceptions do not mirror practice'. Current research into coaching needs to take account of this by building in ways to demonstrate how learning directly impacts upon coaching practitioners and outcomes such as their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (i.e. not just relying on coaches' opinions as the sole level of evidence). Going a little deeper and looking at changes over time is also valuable in understanding the detailed processes involved in coaches' learning.

6. Biography acts as a 'filter' for learning experiences

We have known this one for a while - it is well established that the sum of a coach's previous experiences,

knowledge, values, beliefs and practices - known as their 'biography' - has a big influence on what they learn (Cushion et al. 2010). But how this happens, or the underpinning mechanisms that explain 'what works' and why, in coach learning, have only been evidenced in the past five years (Stodter & Cushion, 2017).

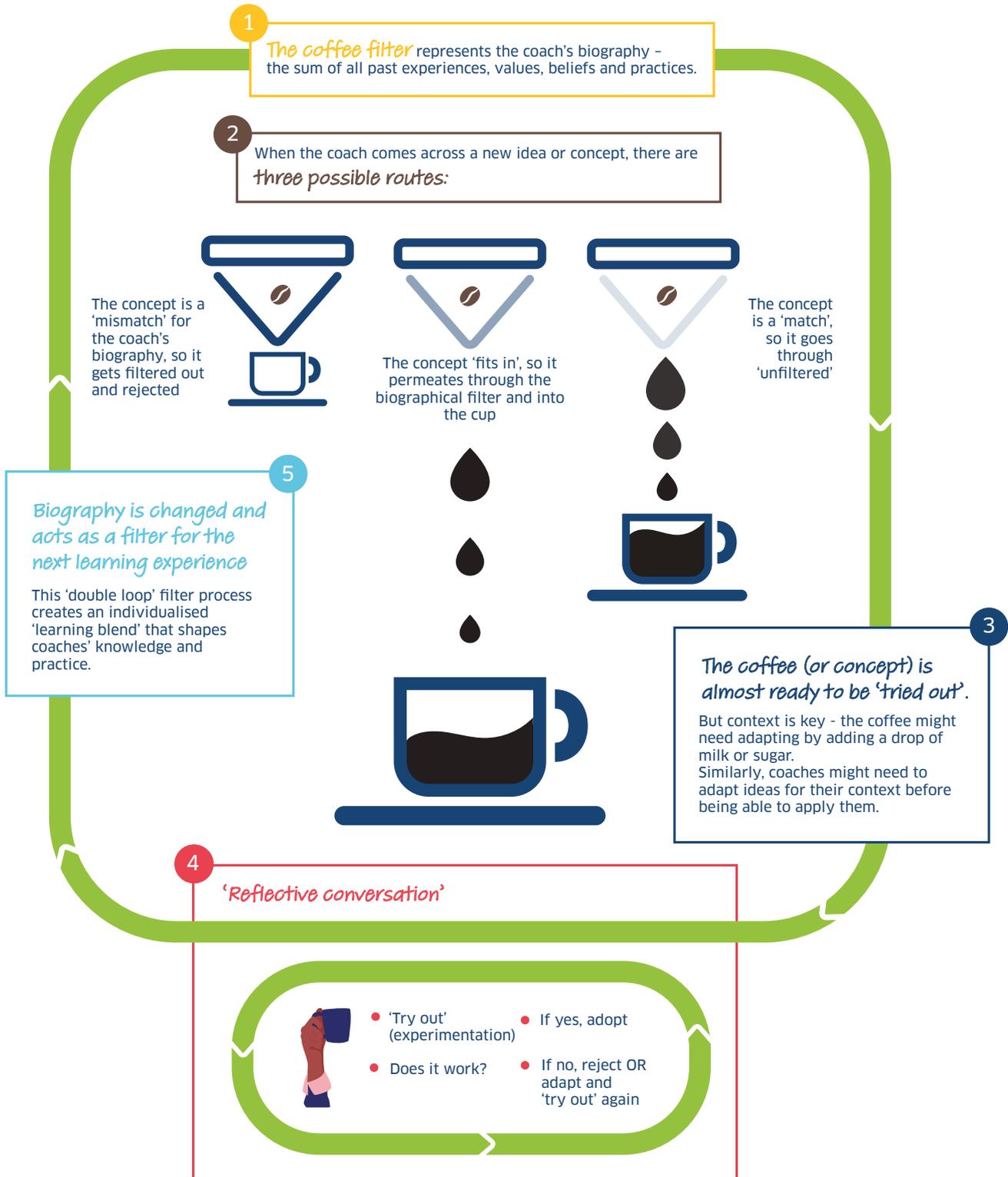
My work with football coaches in the UK used a combination of semi-structured interviews and video stimulated recall interviews, which involved recording coaches' practice, then discussing clips from the session to find out how and why they learned to do what they did. Through building up layers of this data at different time points and comparing participants undergoing a formal coach education course with those continuing in their usual day-to-day practice, I developed a theory of coach learning grounded in the data.

The theory explains a 'filter process' whereby individuals adopted, adapted and rejected 'bits and pieces' from the learning experiences they encountered, such as when attending a course or watching another coach. While the original diagram I developed to represent this process was intended for an academic audience, recently I reimagined it using a coffee filter metaphor (see figure 1). For example, some ideas or concepts the coaches came across would match what they already knew, so they would reinforce their knowledge and do that thing more, as represented by the filter on the right-hand side of figure 1. Some ideas would directly contradict coaches' practice, so they rejected it outright and stuck to what they knew (shown by the filter on the right). Alternatively,

Figure 1:

Research with coaches (Stodter & Cushion, 2017)

has shown that biography acts as a 'filter' for the learning experiences that coaches encounter, shaping what they take on board or not. The illustration helps to represent this process.



an element of a learning experience might be new to the coach yet would 'fit in' with what they already knew, did, valued or believed. It was at this stage that the concept would pass through the individual-level filter (in the middle), enabling it to be tried out in practice. I hope the figure provides a memorable visual to help understand why individuals experiencing the same situation will come away 'unevenly', having learned different things. But I suppose that might depend on whether you count 'coffee connoisseur' as part of your biography!

7. Context is key when trying new things out

To extend the coffee metaphor, once you have your cup full, the next thing you'd do is try it (the lower half of figure 1). If you needed a bit of a boost first thing in the morning, you might adapt it by adding a bit of sugar first, or if it's late in the day you might even leave the coffee altogether. In other words, the context is influential when trying things out.

Bringing it back to what the coaches in my study said about their learning, if a new concept fitted in with their biography but wasn't right for the context they were working within, then they wouldn't try it in practice. They might however adapt it for their particular group or club setting, then give it a go.

To summarise these findings: individuals made their own sense of concepts according to their beliefs about how the new knowledge could be used. However, certain working contexts might limit learning, especially

if coaches don't have wider knowledge or support from others that allows or encourages them to adapt new ideas before or after trying them out.

8. Reflective conversations can mediate learning from experience

Extending what I learnt from my research, there was a final stage in the coaches' learning process represented by the smaller loop (box 4) at the foot of figure 1. By 'mediate learning from experience' I, and other researchers, suggest this additional reflective cycle allows coaches to learn from their practice.

Once coaches believed that new knowledge would work in context, perhaps with some adaptation, their next step was to apply it and experiment with using it. They did this through a 'reflective conversation'. Rather than just a discussion, reflective conversations draw from the work of Donald Schön (1978), characterising the repeating spiral of appreciation (setting the problem), action (generating ideas or strategies, experimenting, and evaluating) and reappreciation. This reflective cycle focused heavily on 'what works' and led to changes in biography ahead of the next learning opportunity. This part of the process suggests that coaches who can deliberately ask themselves, perhaps with the help of others: 'how well did that new idea work in practice, and how do we know? How could it be adapted and tried again?' are likely to get the most from their learning experiences.

9. The important role of ‘coach developers’ is likely to grow

Those who are involved in the education and development of coaches need to understand the key processes of learning in order to help coaches learn. Broadly, coach developers have received researchers’ attention for several years (e.g. North, 2010), but recently there has been an eagerness to better understand who they are, their various roles in mediating quality learning, and how to train and support them (Callary & Gearity, 2020). This is a rapidly expanding area of research focus, but more is not always better. What seems certain is that the demands on those who develop coaches and how they work with any dual role as mentors, tutors, educators, or assessors are progressing alongside ever more ‘learner-centred’ online and blended learning formats. Currently, there isn’t a clear training pathway for coach developers, nor a lot of pedagogical substance or evidence to guide their practice. This provides an opportunity for the coaching sector to learn from what we know about how coaches learn in creating a distinct training pathway to support coach developers, making the most of existing and new resources (such as UK Coaching’s research-informed ‘Influences on Coach Learning’ articles, or the free Open University online ‘Coaching others to Coach’ resource).

10. Diverse perspectives matter

In 2010, Taylor and Garratt remarked that reforms to coaching policy such as implementing UK-wide systems of certification and prescribed curricula had sought to ‘gloss over

cultural difference and diversity’. More than a decade later, the array of coach development programmes and opportunities available seems more varied than ever, especially with the abundance of online resources, webinars and podcasts generated during the pandemic. Indeed, embracing the plurality of coaches, coach developers, contexts, perspectives and approaches is important. There is a danger that coaches merely reinforce their own ideas with ‘people like me’ in ‘echo chambers’ of like-minded discussion, filtering out anything that goes against the grain.

To illustrate this, consider these facts: the UK, Canada and Australia have produced 70% of the research focused on informal coach learning (Walker, Thomas & Driska, 2018), a quarter of studies on coach development programmes relate to football (Campbell & Waller, 2020), and there is a lack of research on the learning of community (grassroots) and disability sports coaches. There is plenty of room to find out more about diverse contexts and cultures. Bringing together different ideas with open-mindedness can foster innovation, transformation, and move the field and the profession forwards.

This journey through a decade of insight about some of the key factors and processes of coach learning can help us attune us towards becoming more effective as coaches, coach developers and researchers. One significant piece of the jigsaw that is yet to be grasped relates to the impact of coaches’ learning on the athletes they are coaching. More accurately, athletes and their outcomes have been treated like a separate puzzle

altogether to coach development outcomes (Walker et al. 2018). After all, if the aim of coaching is to have a positive influence on sport participants, the next ten years should provide an opportunity to establish more evidence about how coaches' learning can benefit outcomes relating to athletes. This includes athletes' performances, experiences and welfare, as well as longer-term and wider questions about sporting culture. Hopefully, this relaunched UK Coaching Applied Research Journal can contribute; a place where coaches can access, appraise and adapt theoretically grounded and robust research evidence for the benefit of their own learning, their profession, and for those they coach.

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