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 Behaviourism, Constructivism and Sports Coaching Pedagogy: A Conversational Narrative in the Facilitation of Player Learning

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Article

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8   facilitation of player learning

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17   Abstract

18   In order to develop our understanding about how learning theory can help to make sense of and

19   inform the facilitation of player learning, this article presents a fictitious discussion, which takes

20   place following a postgraduate sports coaching lecture on learning theories, pedagogy and

21   practice. Following the lecture, Coach Educator (CE) joins two group members for a coffee to

22   listen to their thoughts, experiences, and coaching practices in relation to pertinent player

23   learning theory. Behaviourist Coach (BC) discusses his approach to coaching and how he has

24   come to coach in this way; and his practices that conform to behaviourist learning theory. When

25   BC has finished sharing his views and practices, CE then invites the other student to contribute

26   to the discussion. Constructivist Coach (CC) recognises that his philosophical beliefs about the

27   facilitation of player learning are vastly different to those of BC. As such, CC decides to share

28   his approach to coaching, which aligns itself with constructivist learning theory. It is hoped that

29   this dialogue will not only further theorise the facilitation of player learning, but do so in a way

30   that helps coaching practitioners make the connection between learning theory and coaching

31   practice.

32   *Keywords:* learning theory, fictional narratives, coaching practice,

33   Behaviourism, constructivism and sports coaching pedagogy: A conversational narrative in the

34   facilitation of player learning

35   In recent years, scholars of coaching science have paid increasing attention to how

36   various learning theories and concepts could be used to inform coaching practice and

37   subsequently enhance player learning (e.g., Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Jones, 2006; Light &

38   Wallian, 2008). While such developments are to be welcomed, there still remains a paucity of

39   literature addressing how a theory of learning actually becomes a theory of coaching. This state

40   of affairs is especially surprising given that the teaching and learning interface is considered to

41   be located at the heart of coaching (Jones, 2006). Indeed, coaches across all levels of the sporting

42   spectrum are responsible for helping players to acquire, develop, and refine their sporting

43   attributes, skills and understandings. In addition to teaching sport specific techniques and tactics,

44   coaches in some contexts, are also responsible for helping participants to learn how to be 'good

45   citizens' and to adopt 'healthy lifestyles' (Bloyce & Smith, 2010).

46   Perhaps the point to recognise here is that there are a myriad of different ways in which

47   coaches can teach and help players to learn and achieve desired outcomes (Jones, 2006). Like

48   others (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Cushion et al., 2010) however, we would argue that

49   learning theory has occupied a peripheral position in coach education and indeed coaching

50   practice. This state of affairs could perhaps be partially attributed to the gold standard approach

51   that has traditionally been adopted in much formal coach education provision (Cushion, Armour,

52   & Jones, 2003). Here coach learners are often provided with, and expected to abide by,

53   prescriptive modes of teaching players (Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010). As such it could be

54   argued, that one of the existing weaknesses of current coach education provision, has been the

55   failure to provide coaches with the opportunities to consider the evidence and theory that

56   underpins the prescribed pedagogical methods, how players may perceive and respond to these

57   approaches, and possible alternative ways of facilitating player learning (Potrac & Cassidy,

58   2006).

59   In order to somewhat redress this situation, it is our belief that practitioners could

60   usefully consider the philosophical assumptions and practical applications of pertinent learning

61   theory. In this respect, it is not our intention to promote the effectiveness of one learning theory

62   over another, rather it "is to make coaches and coach educators reflective of previously

63   unconsidered theoretical notions, thus giving them the options to think in different ways about

64   their practice and their consequences" (Jones, 2006, p. 4).

65   In terms of the structure for this particular paper, we begin with a brief theoretical

66   introduction to two contrasting learning theories, namely behaviourism and constructivism. Here

67   we provide an overview of the key philosophical, conceptual, and practical implications of the

68   leading theorists associated with both orientation.

69   **Behaviourist Learning Theory**

70   Modern theories of learning, including behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism are

71   understandably widely reported in educational literature (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). However,

72   prior to any synthesis regarding the epistemologies of behaviourism and constructivism, it is

73   important to recognise that they are both considered to be a theory of learning and not a theory of

74   teaching (Fosnot, 1996). According to Tennant (2006), the inception of behaviourism can be

75   traced back to John Watson's 1913 paper 'Psychology as the behaviorist views it'. In that article,

76   Watson argued that psychology would do well to abandon the study of inaccessible and

77   unobservable mental events and instead focus its attentions on the investigation of behaviour. In

78   this respect, Tennant states that Watson's proposal was underpinned by the assumption that

79   "most of our behaviour is acquired, through learning, which is to say that it is the result of

80   environmental rather than biological influences" (p. 93). As a result of Watson's paper, the

81   investigation of conditions under which learning occurs became a focus for behaviourist

82   researchers.

83   While many scholars have contributed to the development of behaviourist learning

84   theory, Skinner (1904-1990) is arguably the most widely acknowledged behavioural

85   psychologist, especially in relation to thinking about the pedagogical practice of teaching

86   (Tennant, 2006). Skinner is most widely known for his theory of operant conditioning.

87   According to Bernstein et al. (2008), Skinner introduced the term operant to signify a response

88   that operates on the environment. Bernstein et al. (2008) remind us that Skinner's theory

89   proposes that a reinforcer increases the likelihood that an operant behaviour will occur in the

90   future. In this respect Skinner contended that there are two types of reinforcers, namely positive

91   reinforcers and negative reinforcers. The findings of Skinner and other leading behaviourists has

92   clearly impacted on the field of sport psychology. For example, Smith (2006) explains how

93   operant conditioning can be implemented to enhance athletic performance. In this respect, Smith

94   discusses how coaches can shape athletic performance through the presentation and removal of

95   positive (i.e., positive reinforcement, extinction, and response cost punishment) and negative

96   (i.e., punishment and negative reinforcement) stimuli. Smith also briefly identifies the

97   importance of schedules of reinforcement, another key component of behaviourist learning

98   theory.

99   **Constructivist Learning Theories**

100   Constructivism places a significant emphasis on how individuals accrue and develop their

101   knowledge and understanding through their reflective participation in authentic situations and

102   interactions with others (Light & Wallian, 2008). In this regard, constructivism rejects the

103   existence of a single reality, and instead learning is considered to be an active and interpretative

104   process. It is widely understood that constructivism is based upon the seminal work of Dewey

105   (1910; 1938), Piaget (1972), and Vygotsky (1962; 1978). Indeed, it is important to recognise

106   here that the term constructivism does not refer to a single theoretical approach, but rather to a

107   diverse range of theories of human learning (Light & Wallian, 2008). Light and Wallian (2008)

108   are correct when they remind us that constructivism can be classified into two broad camps,

109   namely cognitive/psychological constructivism and socio-cultural constructivism. Whilst there is

110   commonality between these two perspectives, it is worth noting that differences between these

111   schools of thought do exist; principally whether thinking occurs solely in the mind, the whole

112   person, or is socially distributed (Light & Wallian, 2008). As such, in drawing upon the work of

113   Light and Wallian (2008) have suggested the potential benefits of coaches and physical

114   educators not feeling forced to choose between them but, instead, adopting a pragmatic approach

115   that emphasises the dialectical relationship that exists between them.

116   **A Coaching Conversation**

117   In keeping with recent developments regarding the use of fictional dialogues in sports

118   coaching research (e.g., Jones, 2007; Roberts, 2014) we chose to adopt a conversational format

119   for this paper. According to Jones (2007) "the aim of the conversational format is to assist

120   reflection and understanding, not only of the arguments made but of our personal stance to them.

121   It is in this invitation to reflect on the evidence encased in the differing viewpoints presented that

122   the strength of the arrangement lies" (p. 161). In this respect, you, the reader, will inevitably

123   identify with certain aspects of the conversation presented. However, like Jones (2007, p. 161),

124   we also invite you to explore "corridors of meaning [and] unexamined echoes...that lead to sense

125   making as they follow the contours of the interaction"

126   The following text represents a hypothetical conversation following a classroom-based

127   lecture on the topic of learning theory, pedagogy and practice, which a group of coaches

128   studying for a postgraduate qualification in sports coaching have just completed. Prior to the

129   lecture, the Coach Educator (CE) gave the group some pre-class tasks and recommended reading

130   so that the coaches could contextualise some of the theory with their current coaching roles.

131   Following the lecture CE meets up with two of the coaches for an informal discussion over

132   coffee. The first coach in our dialogue is Behaviourist Coach (BC). BC is a young and ambitious

133   male football (soccer) coach who holds aspirations of eventually working at the highest tier of

134   professional football. For a young coach his credentials are already impressive. BC has

135   successfully completed a number of formal National Governing Body (NGB) coach awards and

136   he currently coaches in the academy of a professional football club in England. BC was once a

137   promising young professional footballer; however, his playing career was terminated

138   prematurely due to injury. Following his injury BC completed a BSc in Sports Coaching, and

139   during his undergraduate studies, BC was fortunate to undertake a work based learning

140   placement at a professional football club. BC flourished in this role and following his graduation

141   was successful in securing a full-time coaching position within the academy. As a professional

142   football academy coach BC works with players between 9 and 18 years of age. BC has very

143   high standards for his players and works them extremely hard. He is regimented in the way that

144   he coaches and has a disciplined approach. Indeed, BC believes that it is the coach who should

145   make the key coaching decisions, transmit knowledge to the players, and shape the behaviours

146   and actions of players in a more favourable direction. When BC was playing, his coaches were

147   also very authoritarian, disciplined and regimented, and it was during his playing days that BC

148   first became socialised into the high expectations placed on academy football coaches for results,

149   and immediate and sustained improvements in performance.

150   The second coach in our narrative is Constructivist Coach (CC). CC is also male, but

151   considerably older than BC. CC currently works in a university and is responsible for teaching

152   sports coaching pedagogy to undergraduate students. In conjunction with this role at the

153   university, CC also works as a coach for a large National Governing Body (NGB). The

154   philosophical orientation and pedagogic beliefs surrounding coaching for CC are somewhat

155   different to that of BC. CC endeavours to avoid traditional forms of instruction, opting instead to

156   engage in team-based discussions through questioning and offering his opinions and experiences.

157   CC openly encourages his players to take risks and responsibility in the learning process. Indeed,

158   CC takes pride in the autonomy and interdependence of his players. In this respect, CC is

159   committed to a 'learner first' approach to coaching that promotes the development of what he

160   refers to as 'thinking players'. Here, CC has observed with some pride how his players have been

161   able to develop solutions to technical and tactical problems with minimal help and guidance from

162   himself.   We join the conversation as CE joins both BC and CC for a coffee.

163   **CE:** Hi guys, any objections if I join you? Thank you for your enthusiasm in the lecture just

164   now. I have to say one of the issues I face when delivering this module is marrying the divide

165   between the theory and the practice. Learning theory can be quite a dry and complicated topic

166   and I was conscious I did a lot of talking in there. I didn't really get the opportunity to establish

167   how the theory is aligned to your personal philosophical orientations. Would you mind if I ask

168   you both how you think the theory matches up to your thoughts, beliefs and outlooks regarding

169   your players learning.

170   **BC:** Yeah, no problem. I would be only too happy to share my views and experiences if that's

171   ok with you CC? Having listened to your lecture, and completed the readings, I think it is fair to

172   say that my practices and outlook in this regard are probably in-keeping with a behaviourist view

173   of learning.

174   **CC:** Interestingly, I have a different point of view. I would say, and based upon what I have

175   heard, read and experienced through my own coaching, I am probably more aligned with a

176   constructivist view of learning. However, this was not always the case.

177   **CE**: [*Smiles and gives BC and CC a positive nod*] Okay, guys that's really useful. Do you think

178   we could probe some of the issues or indeed tensions regarding both these philosophical

179   viewpoints? Perhaps we could explore the difficulties associated with learning these approaches.

180   Would that be okay?

181   **BC:** Okay, but for me, coaching is not just about helping the players to learn and improve the

182   technical and tactical aspects of their sporting performances; it's also about getting them to

183   behave in accepted ways more broadly. In my sport for example, I'm not just teaching the

184   players about how to pass the ball or implement a sophisticated defensive system, I also want

185   them to clearly understand how they should conduct themselves in the coaching environment.

186   They need to know what behaviours are acceptable and unacceptable. If you don't have a well

187   ordered, structured coaching environment, the sessions would descend into an unstructured mess.

188   **CC:** [*Interrupts*] Apologies for interrupting you BC but I guess this is the crux of the problem. I

189   remember when I offered to help out at my son's rugby club. The other coaches were running

190   their drills, cones were everywhere, and too be honest it looked really structured and organised,

191   but also *really* [*emphasis added*] predictable. I suppose this is where my philosophical

192   orientation to player learning is different. My preference for a constructivist approach to

193   learning view games such as rugby or football as unpredictable. My view is that games such as

194   these are chaotic; no passage of play is ever the same. Therefore, if we have a game which is

195   unpredictable, why do we coach it in a predictable manner? Surely football or rugby cannot be

196   viewed as absolute? We need to let the game be the teacher and allow the players to make

197   decisions for themselves.

198   **CE:** That sounds very interesting; CC and perhaps we could touch on this point later.   However,

199   BC could you tell us a little more about how you go about helping the players to learn the skills,

200   tactics, and acceptable behaviours? What do you do? How do you do it? What has influenced

201   you to coach like this? How do you understand your practices in relation to the readings that you

202   have engaged with for this class?

203   **BC:** [*Smiles*] I thought that you might ask me those questions. Let's start with the first question

204   about what I do as a coach to help players learn. I like to use lots of instruction, praise and

205   rewards, as I've found that, by and large, most of the players that I have worked with respond

206   well to this. I've found that the use of specific and meaningful praise tends to get the players to

207   consistently behave in the ways that I want. For example, if a player executes a skill well, I will

208   always provide some technical or tactical feedback with the praise, as I want them to continue to

209   repeat that aspect of their performance that I am referring to. It's the same for their general

210   behaviour within the environment. If the players stop and stand still to listen to me when I

211   request them to do so during an exercise or drill, then I like to reinforce that too. It's an

212   important part of developing a productive learning environment.

213   **CC:** [*Smirking*] Yes, but isn't professional football a classic example of where *you* [*slightly*

214   *raised voice*] the coach holds all the power. I don't mean to generalise, to all academy football

215   coaches, but the paper you asked us to read [*pointing to CE*] for the Coaching Process module,

216   what was it? Ah yes, Cushion and Jones (2006). They referred to the monolithic power

217   relationship which existed between the players and the coach. I suspect your players will do

218   anything, and behave in a manner you want. I bet they are worried that if they don't behave in

219   the manner you expect, they will either not be selected or worse released from the club.

220   **CE:** [*Feeling the need to step in as BC looks a little offended*] Well let's just hang on a second.

221   To be fair to BC it sounds like he endeavours to be very positive with the players. Let's pick up

222   on the point raised by CC. What happens though when the players do something wrong? Say

223   they perform a skill or strategy incorrectly and cost you the game, or move around when you've

224   asked them to standstill? What do you do then?

225   **BC:** I use different approaches here really. If the player makes a mistake but I think they are

226   genuinely trying then I'll step in and explain what they did wrong and show him or her how to

227   perform the skill correctly. However, if I think a player is messing about then I'll tend to give

228   them a punishment. It could be anything from 10 star jumps, to run a couple of laps of the pitch,

229   or to sit out the remainder of the session. It depends upon what the player has or has not done.

230   I've noticed the players really don't like missing out on the match at the end of the session or

231   selection for the game at the weekend. The threat of removing them from this activity really

232   seems to work.

233   **CE:** Thanks for that, BC. CC before I ask you about your thoughts regarding facilitating player

234   learning? Would you mind if I ask BC a couple more questions?

235   **CC:** No that's fine.

236   **CE:** I've really enjoyed listening to what you've had to say so far BC. It seems that you are very

237   busy during the training sessions giving instructions, providing demonstrations and delivering all

238   the feedback. However, I just wondered what type of input the players have during the sessions?

239   **BC**: I think it's fair to say that I do pretty much all of the talking. But then that's my job, that's

240   what I do, it's my bread and butter! I can diagnose the faults with the players' performances and

241   I can fix them through my use of feedback and, potentially, punishments. I think it's also fair to

242   say my methods are well tested. When I was a player, my coaches were very autocratic and they

243   were in control of the coaching environment. They had all played the game to a very high level,

244   and the feedback they provided was often brutal, but at least they told you how to improve.

245   **CE**: That's really interesting, BC. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you more about the feedback

246   you provide and how you think that facilitates their learning in a moment. Before that however,

247   could I ask how you would define your success as a coach in relation to player learning?

248   **BC**: Well, that's simple really. It's all about them [*the players*] behaving and responding in the

249   right ways, be it in terms of their general behaviour or how they conduct themselves and perform

250   in training and competition. I measure my success, and failure for that matter, in my ability to

251   consistently bring about desired behavioural patterns. It's not what they think or might know, it's

252   how they behave and perform that ultimately matters most to me.

253   **CE**: Thanks for sharing that with us, BC. If you don't mind, I'd also like to know a little bit

254   more about why and how you use praise and rewards. For example, how regularly do you praise

255   players who are performing in the desired way? Do you do it every time?

256   **BC:** That's a good question. I don't praise and correct behaviour every time a player does

257   something right. When introducing a new skill, technique, strategy or indeed an appropriate way

258   of behaving within my coaching environment, I tend to praise regularly so that the players

259   associate the desired behaviours and actions with a reward. I want them to clearly see the

260   consequences of performing and acting in certain ways. However, once I see that the players

261   seem to be reproducing the desired behaviour on a regular basis, I tend to reduce the amount of

262   praise I provide. That is, because I can see that they have learnt to do the right things, I'll praise

263   them sporadically to ensure that the desired behaviour is maintained.

264   **CC:** (*Joins the conversation)* I think I understand what BC is driving at in terms of the amount

265   and timing of praise, but how do you praise? What rewards do you use? How do you know that

266   an individual will respond to them in the way that you want?

267   **BC:** I tend to watch and listen to the players and try and get a feel for them as individuals and as

268   a collective group. Finding what works is one of the challenges of coaching for me. I use a range

269   of rewards. For example, for some people just telling them that they've done well is enough, for

270   others it has been about providing small rewards such as player-of-the day awards. Mainly

271   though, showing the players that you are pleased with their behaviours and performances seems

272   to work really well. That's certainly the philosophy that underpins my approach.

273   **CE:** You also mentioned punishments; can I ask you about these, BC? What approach do you

274   adopt there?

275   **BC:** That's a tricky one, CE. My preference is to praise and reinforce positive behaviour as much

276   as is possible. I think that makes for a more positive environment. Equally, the threat of taking

277   away something that the players like seems to really work. Probably, my best example is

278   threatening players that the match at the end of the session won't take place if they [*the players]*

279   don't perform in the right ways. As for punishments, I tend to use them sparingly and only when

280   I really feel I have to.

281   **CC:** Why is that?

282   **BC:** Well, I've found that some players really don't respond to it in the ways that I would have

283   hoped for. I've noticed that players sometimes make more errors because of the fear of

284   punishment. Equally, I've noticed that using punishments can build up a great deal of resentment

285   in some players. While I think I could punish a player and then re-engage with them in the

286   session, my experiences have taught me that players may not always be so understanding. I'll

287   always remember the time I punished a player for performing badly in a passing drill. I thought

288   his movement was lazy and I told him this in no uncertain terms in front of the rest of the group.

289   I also made him sit out of the session for 10 minutes. When he returned to the session he was

290   certainly more active in his movement, but I could see the anger in his face when he looked at

291   me. It took a few weeks for me to reconnect with him. It wasn't good for me, him or the team. If

292   I did this to every player every week, I don't think I would have a team left to coach! That said,

293   if I feel the situation warrants it, I'm happy to dish out a suitably harsh punishment.

294   **CC:** I can empathise with you here BC. I can remember when I was a young cricket coach. I

295   held a similar philosophical orientation to you. I was coaching a county cricket squad. I

296   remember this one game against our fiercest rivals; we needed four runs from the last over to win

297   the game. I was going mad from the boundary, shouting out instructions, kicking the boundary

298   markers and becoming increasingly more and more animated. The players who were batting

299   were not our recognized batters, and they were really struggling against the opposition's opening

300   bowlers. Instead of trying to run 'quick singles' they tried to smash every ball to the boundary.

301   At the end of the game, when we were defeated, I completely lost it. I was shouting at the

302   players, throwing bits of cricket equipment around the round. I was dishing out all sorts of

303   punishments, until the captain put his hand up. What he said has remained with me ever since,

304   and I suspect this has contributed to my preference for a different philosophical belief about

305   coaching.

306   **BC:** Well come on CC, don't keep us waiting. What did the player say?

307   **CC:** He said, 'How dare you punish us for something you have not taught us'. 'How were those

308   batters, who have only batted once this season supposed to win us the game'? 'Have you shown

309   them how to run quick singles? We have never practiced this'. As I left the ground that day, I felt

310   humbled, saddened and embarrassed that my junior captain was right. How dare I shout

311   criticisms from the boundary edge, how dare I launch cricket pads across the changing room,

312   how dare I subject these young players to outbursts of personal abuse. They were placed in a

313   situation that required 'thinking' and 'decision making 'and up to this point all I had

314   concentrated on was techniques. I had not practiced with the squad end-of-game scenarios, or

315   instigated problems for the players to solve. How could I expect them to know what to do?

316   *[Looking embarrassed]*

317   **CE:** I think you both raise a number of important points here. While we would all like to adopt a

318   particular view of player learning and apply it unproblematically in our practices, helping players

319   to learn just isn't that straightforward.

320   **CE:** Thanks for sharing your thoughts BC, very insightful. Listen, I am really conscious that BC

321   has done most of the talking thus far; I know that CC holds a contrasting view, so perhaps it

322   would be appropriate to listen to his approach on the facilitation of player learning?

323   **CC:** Perhaps you are right CE, given that I've been putting BC on the spot, I think it's only fair

324   that I share my views and experiences on this topic.

325   **CE:** That's great, CC. Go ahead.

326   **CC:** I remember when I was younger I was very similar to BC. Actually, if I am completely

327   honest, I see a lot of my early coaching behaviour mirrored in his experiences. However, my

328   philosophy changed after a very humbling experience.

329   **CE:** What happened? Have you not explored this already in the cricket example?

330   **CC:** Oh no. This was before I coached the county cricket side. After I graduated from teacher

331   training college and secured my first teaching post, I used to coach a basketball school team, they

332   were good, very good in actual fact, and we regularly reached the national school basketball

333   finals in a number of age groups. At that time, I was influenced by the district basketball coach

334   and he used to promote a numbered offence. For example, our taller, rebounding forwards were

335   numbered four and five. Our fast, agile wing players were numbered two and three and our ball

336   handling guard was numbered one. I remember as though it were only yesterday, four and five

337   compete for the rebound, two and three fill the lanes, one becomes the outlet. Using this as basis

338   for my coaching, I set about developing a well-drilled and organised team. We had set-plays for

339   attacking and a rigid zonal system for defending. We practiced both aspects repeatedly until I

340   felt the players could complete them with their eyes shut. The movements and passing had

341   become automatic. I took a great deal of satisfaction from watching the players perform these

342   tasks so efficiently in training and the way we had comprehensively beaten other teams on the

343   way to the national final.

344   **BC:** Sounds great so far. So what happened to change the way you coach?

345   **CC:** We lost the final! In fact we didn't just lose, we were hammered! I couldn't believe it, to

346   be honest, I still can't believe it. I remember walking out of the changing room area and into the

347   sports hall and watching the opposition complete their warm-up. They looked well-skilled but

348   nothing to be scared of. In fact their warm-up looked so unstructured compared to ours that I

349   thought that we had won before the match had even started. Their coach was a really agreeable

350   chap, he shook my hand, we exchanged some pleasantries and then he sat down and very calmly

351   just watched his team going through the warm-up. One of their players orchestrated their

352   practices and the coach offered nothing but an occasional clap of the hands, a satisfying nod of

353   improvement or a thumbs up sign. I thought he must be filling in for the day as the real coach

354   must have been ill or unable to get to the game. I was soon to learn quite the opposite.

355   **BC**: That sounds exciting to me. Did you do any technical work or was it all problem-solving

356   and small-sided games?

357   **CC**: It wasn't all small-sided games and problem solving, we would still incorporate drills as

358   and when they were needed, but it was no longer the only method of coaching implemented.

359   During this time my whole philosophy changed, it wasn't about controlling the players and the

360   session, it wasn't just about techniques and fancy drills, it was about the players' learning and

361   decision making.

362   **BC**: The use of questions and problem-solving suggests that the session could be a bit too

363   improvised for my liking. It sounds like you could end up 'flying by the seat of your plants' at

364   times. Why didn't you just tell the players what you wanted them to know?

365   **CC**: There was improvisation that was for sure. But the sessions certainly weren't unplanned and

366   ad-hoc at all. As I worked with Rob, I came to realise just how knowledgeable he was about

367   basketball. His knowledge of the techniques and strategies really impressed me. It was amazing

368   to think that the person who sat so quietly during that basketball final actually knew so much.

369   Rather than telling the players what they needed to know and do, he used his knowledge to ask

370   insightful questions that, for me at least, would really provoke the players to engage with the task

371   in hand. His session plans were incredibly detailed in terms of the activities he wanted to engage

372   the players in. But what really struck me, was the planning that he put into the questions that he

373   asked the players. He had key questions and prompts for every activity. He was equally happy to

374   go 'off-script' if the players' questions and responses took the session in a different direction.

375   For me, that's where his knowledge of the sport and his responses to the players really impressed

376   me the most. I don't think you could ask the insightful questions that he did without really

377   knowing your sport inside-out. I found this approach much more challenging than how I had

378   previously coached. For me, I found telling people the key points much easier to deliver. It was

379   all pre-planned and I followed the script. The interactive nature of coaching in the way that Rob

380   did was a real challenge for me. It definitely put me outside of my comfort zone.

381   **BC:** Was it easy to adopt and change your beliefs and values and the way you coached?

382   **CC:** No it was difficult and it still is. Sometimes I lapse back into my previous approach to

383   coaching; I still have urges to 'jump in' and tell players what I think they should do, before

384   giving them time and space to think things through on their own. When I was younger I didn't

385   really care about their understanding, I just wanted them to be able to perform as I had

386   instructed. But now I want them to gain a better appreciation of factors contributing towards

387   effective performance. Some players that I've worked with find my approach difficult to get to

388   grips with as it's different to other coaches that they have played under. Some players want and

389   expect me to provide them with all the answers. Similarly, administrators and parents sometimes

390   question why my approach differs to other coaching practitioners

391   **BC:** In what way?

392   **CC:** Well to begin with some of the parents thought I was not interested. Some of the parental

393   comments included; 'He's not coaching, he's just letting them play', 'I don't think he is really

394   interested, look at the other coaches, they are all using the new equipment'. I also endured a

395   humiliating experience during a one-to-one net session. Looking back it's quite funny really, but

396   I had just attended an English and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) workshop on the use of

397   questioning approaches with players. In my next coaching session, I was determined to give this

398   approach a go. However, in the end it was a disaster, I asked so many questions that the player

399   threw down his bat and stormed off. Both of these examples have served me well and reminded

400   me that if you do adopt alternative modes of instruction it is important to inform both parents and

401   players of your reasons for doing so.

402   **CE:** I think that's a really important point to recognise here. As stated earlier in today's lecture,

403   applying any learning theory to coaching practice is not an entirely straightforward activity.

404   **BC:** So do you think that a constructivist approach to the facilitation of player learning is better

405   than a behaviourist one?

406   **CC:** Well I wouldn't say it is better, but it is different. There doesn't seem to be any scientific

407   coaching studies that say one approach is superior to any other. I'm certainly not saying that

408   everyone should adopt a constructivist approach to their coaching. Other coaches can be very

409   successful when using a behaviourist approach. I've got no problem with it. For me, the biggest

410   differences are more philosophical in nature. I've had to think about the learning experience I

411   provide to my players. I've come to realise that I want the players that I work with to understand

412   the nuances and complexities of the sport, I want them to be able to solve problems, and

413   personally I think they stand to gain a great deal of satisfaction from this. As I learnt in that

414   basketball final, perhaps it will help me to win a couple of basketball games as well! [CC and BC

415   laugh]

416   **CE:** Thank you both for your insightful contributions. From my perspective it's apparent that as

417   coaching practitioners there are numerous approaches that we can adopt in an attempt to enhance

418   the learning and development of our players. I guess that reinforces both your view, that in

419   actual fact there is no right way to coach and one pedagogic and learning approach is not

420   superior to the other.

421   **Concluding Thoughts**

422   The key point from this article was to encourage you, the reader, to critically reflect upon

423   how you view player learning and attempt to facilitate it in your respective coaching practices, a

424   process that we believe all coaches and their players could benefit from.

425   As both BC and CC have highlighted behaviourism and constructivism come with their

426   respective merits and challenges. What is important here is that as coaches we understand that

427   facilitating player learning is not a straightforward activity.

428   For sports coaches this situation is hampered by the reported failure of formal coach

429   education courses to provide its participants with sufficient opportunities to develop innovative

430   coaching practice, or to develop the essential reflective skills necessary for effective coaching

431   (Nelson & Cushion, 2006). Furthermore Nelson, Cushion and Potrac (2006, p.251) raised

432   concerns whether formal coach education was "training or indoctrination?" and argued for coach

433   education teams to develop more alternative and imaginative modes of instruction, in order to

434   help sports coaches deal with the complex and 'messy' reality of coaching. We would also argue

435   that coach education should allow coaches the opportunity to consider and demonstrate their

436   understanding of pertinent learning theories. We agree with Light (2008, p.402) in that

437   behaviorism or constructivism cannot be condensed into a "step-by-step prescription for

438   teaching". It is our opinion that sports coaches would benefit from an understanding of how

439   learning theories could improve their own and their players' learning.

440   During our brief discussion we covered just two of the different theoretical approaches to

441   learning. We did not mention humanistic approaches, cognitivism or the sociocultural aspects of

442   learning. Therefore would we encourage further investigation into these theories of learning, and

443   their possible application to a theory of coaching.

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