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Behaviourism, constructivism and sports coaching pedagogy: A conversational narrative in the
facilitation of player learning

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,

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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),

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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

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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.

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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

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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,

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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?

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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

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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

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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?

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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?

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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

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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 pants' 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

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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

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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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