**Developing coaches’ knowledge of the athlete-coach relationship through formal coach education: the perceptions of FA Coach Developers**

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**Abstract**

Developing high quality A-C relationships improves both athlete performance and well-being. However, content relating to the A-C relationship has been underrepresented within coach education. The study evaluates how coaches completing the English FA’s UEFA A and B Licenses develop knowledge of the A-C relationship. It does so by drawing on the perspectives of those who design and deliver the courses. Semi structured interviews were completed with nine experienced FA coach developers alongside a document analysis of seven key course documents. Data was analysed through an inductive thematic analysis and five themes were generated; 1.) Coach developers understand the A-C relationship is built on trust, care and hard and soft interpersonal approaches. 2.) The triad of knowledge impacts on the A-C relationship, not just interpersonal knowledge. 3.) The A-C relationship is not meaningfully addressed in the formalised course content. 4.) In situ visits provide an effective medium to develop knowledge of the A-C relationship. 5.) The assessment framework does not align with the formalised course content. Findings demonstrate despite a diversification in content, the A-C relationship is introduced in a superficial manner. Future research should clarify the knowledge coaches require to develop high quality A-C relationships within a high-performance footballing context.

**Introduction**

The athlete-coach relationship is at the heart of effective coaching (Jowett, 2017). High quality A-C relationships have been found to positively influence athletes’ physical and psychosocial development (Davis & Jowett, 2014), well-being (Felton & Jowett, 2013) and performance (Cook et al., 2021; Rhind & Jowett, 2010). In contrast, when the A-C relationship is of a poor-quality, the coach and athlete are unable to co-operate to achieve their mutual aims (Jowett, 2017). In extreme cases, these relationships risk producing negative dependencies, can demonstrate a misuse of power or even become abusive (Gaedicke et al., 2021). In order for coaching to be successful and effective, the responsibility resides within the coach and athlete to form a high-quality relationship (Jowett, 2017). Researchers suggest expectations of the A-C relationship are evolving (Ferrar et al., 2018). Coaches are expected to employ a broad, well developed, set of knowledge and skills to foster relationships that meet the expectations and values of this new generation of athletes (Ferrar et al., 2018).

A coach’s knowledge embraces the integration of professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Professional knowledge relates to the specialised knowledge of the coach, including sports-specific and pedagogical knowledge. Intrapersonal knowledge refers to a coach's understanding of themselves and their ability for reflection. Interpersonal knowledge involves the development and management of relationships between coaches, parents and, most importantly, athletes themselves (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). However, Lefebvre et al. (2016) analysed 285 formal coach development programmes, across a variety of sports, and found that 261 focused on professional knowledge, such as technical and tactical skills, with only 18 driven by the development of interpersonal skills and just 6 concentrated on the development of intrapersonal skills. Turnbridge and Côté (2017) concluded that interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge remained under-represented within formal coach education. Evans et al. (2015) agrees and describes how interpersonal behaviours are only “occasionally targeted” as one of the coaching competencies in certification programmes (p. 871). Ferrar et al. (2018) states that, “Coach education programmes have been criticised for not providing sufficient coverage of this topic or giving coaches opportunities to develop effective coach-athlete relationship building skills” (p. 61). Ferrar et al. (2018) point to a paucity of research in the area, stating “Rarely is the process of how coaches are taught to build effective athlete-coach relationships and the impact of these efforts, described in the coach education literature” (p. 60). This paper aims to help address this gap in the research.

Coaches develop their professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge through a variety of means (Nelson et al., 2006). Nelson at al. (2006) utilised Coombs and Ahmed’s (1974) conceptual framework which highlights that people learn through formal, informal and non-formal methods and in a variety of contexts. Formal learning refers to coaching qualifications, for example those delivered by NGBs or high education institutions. Non-formal learning focuses on educational activity undertaken outside the framework of the formal system such as coaching conferences, workshops and clinics. Informal learning is the lifelong process by which practitioners acquire and accumulate knowledge and skills from daily experiences including mentoring, practical coaching experience, experiences as an athlete and interactions with other coaches (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). Evans et al. (2015) described how formal coach education, mandated by governing bodies, is going through a period of growth. Dempsey et al. (2022) describes how the ever-changing nature of coaching practice requires coach education courses to aid coaches in drawing upon multiple disciplines of knowledge to navigate these complexities. However, Allan et al. (2018) argued that there is, typically, little research regarding the content delivered within the courses. Dempsey et al. (2022) also argued that it is common for studies to assess how coaches learn rather than what they learn. This makes exploring how the A-C relationship is integrated, within a formal coach education course, a pertinent area of study.

The lack of integration of the A-C relationship in coach education is in contrast to a recent surge in empirical and theoretical research which has positioned the A-C relationship as integral to effective coaching (Jowett, 2017). Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004) define the A-C relationship as a unique interpersonal association in which emotions, thoughts and behaviours of the coach and the athlete are mutually and causally interconnected. Jowett’s (2005) 3C+1 model has contributed to a better understanding of the core constructs that form high quality A-C relationships along with the thoughts and feelings that are inherent within it. The core components are closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation. *Closeness* illustrates the interpersonal feelings of coaches and athletes and the emotional bond that exists between them. *Commitment* reflects the interpersonal thoughts of the athlete and coach and their ability to maintain a tight and close relationship over time. *Complementarity* describes the interpersonal behaviours and the extent to which the coach and the athlete work together co-operatively. Lastly, *co-orientation* reflects the level of inter-dependence between the coach and the athlete taking into account their opinion regarding the quality of the relationship. Further research by Rhind and Jowett (2010) proposed the use of the COMPASS model to identify the key maintenance strategies within the A-C relationship. The model contains seven key communication strategies focusing on conflict management, openness, motivation, preventative, assurance, support and social networks. These conceptual models have helped develop understanding regarding the characteristics of high-quality A-C relationships and the strategies coaches may utilise to develop and maintain them. Jowett and Cockerill (2003) argue that coach education programmes, such as those delivered by the English Football Association (FA), should not focus only on providing information that concentrates on the technical, strategic and tactical skills, but also providing coaches with information that would assist them to develop effective relationships with their athletes.

The English FA is an appropriate case study because it provides coach education to a large number of coaches, nationally, across England (circa 30,00 per annum) (Chapman et al., 2020). Further, the FA has attempted to adopt a broader conceptualisation of coaching, beginning with the introduction of the four-corner model by Simmons (2005). This model adopts a holistic view of player development and takes into account the technical, physical, social and psychological needs of players (Chapman et al., 2020). Subsequently, there has been substantial changes made to the content integrated within FA courses over recent years (Chapman et al., 2020). More recently, Dempsey et al. (2022) explored the subject matter incorporated in the FA’s introductory courses and found the curriculum was partially informed by research which adopted concepts mainly from sports psychology, physiology and, to a lesser extent, pedagogy and skill acquisition. The current research aims to further explore high performance coach education. It is unique, not only in its focus on the A-C relationship within formal coach education, but that it captures the perceptions of a variety of highly experienced coach developers within the English FA, who have both designed and delivered these courses. The research seeks to explore the following three key questions:

1. What are the coach developers understanding of the A-C relationship, given they are an integral part of the course delivery?
2. What do coach developers perceive to be the important knowledge required for coaches to be proficient at developing and maintaining high quality A-C relationships in high performance footballing settings?
3. How is the topic of the A-C relationship integrated within the current FA UEFA A and B Licence courses?

This may have significant implications for national governing bodies (NGBs), coach developers and course designers as they seek to better understand how to incorporate this topic within well balanced and comprehensive coach education curricula. By using a specific case study, it provides an up-to-date account of the current situation regarding how this content is currently being integrated within the flagship courses of one of the leading providers of coach education within England.

**Method**

**Context**

The English FA considers formal coach education as an opportunity to improve the standard of coaching practice. Coaches in England are certified by the FA through UEFA (the Union of European Football Associations). The FA’s formal coaching pathway starts at Level 1 and progresses through to Level 5, with each stage providing greater detail and requiring additional commitment from candidates (The FA, 2017). Courses are delivered from a centralised venue and contain a mix of practical and classroom-based sessions, which are delivered by FA coach developers. The current research will specifically focus on performance coaching and the UEFA B (Level 3) and UEFA A (Level 4) courses within the FA Coaching Pathway (The FA, 2017). Completion of these courses provides coaches with a gateway to full time employment in the professional game. The details of these courses are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. UEFA A and B License Course details

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Course Details | UEFA B Coaching Licence | UEFA A Coaching Licence |
| Pre-requisite criteria | Hold an FA Level 2 in Coaching Football or UEFA C in Coaching Football  Be actively coaching a team in a season-long competition.  Introduction to First Aid in Football and Safeguarding Children Course  Reside in England | Hold a UEFA B in Coaching Football  Applications are vetted by the course director. Priority given to:  Coaches currently working in England.  Full time coaches working within the senior male or female professional game.  Those who need the qualification to meet EPP (auditing of professional academies) criteria.  Part time professional academy coaches. |
| Duration | 9-12 months | 12 months |
| Number of face-to-face contact days | 9 days | 12 days |
| Number of blocks | 4 blocks | 6 blocks |
| Number of In-situ visits | A minimum of 3 in-situ visits | A minimum of 3 in-situ visits |

**Paradigm Positioning**

The current research explores the understanding and perceptions of FA coach developers on how the FA UEFA A and B Licence courses integrate the topic of the A-C relationship. The research is underpinned by interpretivism along with ontological relativism which suggests “social reality is humanly constructed and shaped in a way that makes it fluid and multifaceted” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 11). Epistemologically a constructivist position is adopted which proposes that knowledge is both constructed and subjective. Following these paradigmatic assumptions, a qualitative instrumental design was chosen (Stake, 1995).

**Participants**

We purposefully sampled nine male participants aged 42 to 67 (mean age=53, SD=9.31). All were of white British ethnicity. There is a small number of FA National Coach Developers to sample from, hence the lack of diversity amongst participants. We selected participants based on meeting the following criteria; (1) they had delivered on the UEFA A or UEFA B Licence courses for a minimum of three years; (2) they had delivered on the UEFA A or UEFA B Licence courses within the last two years; (3) they had delivered on a minimum of five UEFA A or UEFA B courses. Meeting all three criteria ensured participants had substantial, and recent, experience of the courses, giving them the capability to compare and contrast developments and changes made to the courses over time. At the time of the study, participants held a number of different roles within the FA (Table 2). Some are employed as part time Affiliate Tutors who deliver and assess the UEFA B License courses through local County Football Associations. Others were National Coach Developers who tutor UEFA A license courses from the FA National Football Centre. Some participants were, also, involved in the design of the UEFA B and UEFA A Licence. The sample size is based on the point at which data saturation was reached, meaning no new information or themes were observed in the data. We deemed the sample size of 9 participants sufficient based on Malterud’s et al. (2016) concept of “informational power” (p. 1753). Given that this study’s research questions were narrow, we believe that the participants interviewed held significant information, due to their vast experiences, and relevance due to the sample being highly specific to the research questions we posed.

Table 2. Representation of coach developer’s current role and experience in coach education

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Coach Educator (pseudonym) | Course involvement | Current Role | Years in current role | Years in coach education |
| Tony | UEFA B | Part time FA Affiliate Tutor | 27 years | 27 years |
| Rob | UEFA B | Part time FA Affiliate Tutor | 35 years | 35 years |
| Ste | UEFA B | Part time FA Affiliate Tutor | 31 years | 31 years |
| Mark | UEFA B | Part time FA Affiliate Tutor | 16 years | 16 years |
| Lee | UEFA B | FA Course Designer | 11 months | 17 years |
| Andy | UEFA A | FA National Youth Coach Developer | 8 years | 18 years |
| Mike | UEFA A | FA National Youth Coach Developer | 3 years | 3 years |
| John | UEFA A | FA National Youth Coach Developer | 7 years | 20 years |
| Russ | UEFA A | FA National Youth Coach Developer | 7 years | 13 years |

**Data Collection**

**Semi-structure interviews**

Prior to commencing data collection, institutional ethical approval was provided. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview guide was developed with open ended questions. The guide enabled participants to be asked the same set of core questions while also enabling them to lead the conversations and to elaborate and share their lived experience (Patton, 2002). The interview guide was shaped by our three research questions and consisted of the following areas; (1) Background information (career history, coaching history and experience in coach education). This was a brief section that aimed to provide the interviewer with some context of the coach developers experience, that they may draw upon in later questions. (2) Personal understanding of the A-C relationship (key skills relating to the A-C relationship, pertinent personal experiences of the A-C relationship, perceptions of the ‘best’ coach with regards to relationships developed with their athletes). This section focused on collecting data on our first two research questions. It was important to assess the coach developers understanding of the A-C relationship, given they are an integral part of the course delivery and their knowledge would shape the course content. Given their vast experiences, we explored what the coach developers perceive to be the important knowledge required for coaches to be proficient at developing and maintaining high quality A-C relationships in high performance footballing settings. By drawing this information from the coach developers it also enabled us to use this information to subsequently pose questions about how the courses aimed to develop the specific content outlined within their previous answers. Coaches were also encouraged to reflect on their past coaching and playing experiences to exemplify their responses and provide richer data. (3) Current perceptions of the UEFA licence course and content relating to the A-C relationship (Content relating to professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge, relevant workshops, use of conceptual models, key skills developed in coaches on course, methods of delivery, assessment and key competencies). This was the largest section and formed the main body of the interview. It aimed to collect data for our third research question which focused on how the topic of the A-C relationship was integrated within the current FA UEFA A and B Licence courses. (4) Personal perceptions on the future direction of the UEFA A and B Licence course and content relating to the A-C relationship (Content relating to professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge, relevant workshops, use of conceptual models, key skills developed in coaches on course, methods of delivery, assessment and key competencies). This was a short section but offered an opportunity, if required, for coach developers to articulate their views on the integration of content relating to the A-C relationship as courses evolve in the future. Fellow authors reviewed the interview guide and provided relevant feedback. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews took place on video calling software and were audio recorded and transcribed. Prior to each interview commencing, the aims of the research were discussed whilst also assuring participants of confidentiality and anonymity. In total 363 minutes (mean 40.22, SD=17.17) of audio recorded interview data was collected.

**Document analysis**

A document analysis was used to consider resources that impacted the content and delivery of the courses. These key documents either directly supported the on-course delivery and assessment by coach developers (e.g. PowerPoint slides, learner journals and assessment frameworks) or mapped the course content (e.g. course curriculum documents). This allowed us to supplement data collected from our semi-structured interviews and develop a more robust understanding of the FA UEFA A and B Licence courses. Documents were analysed to understand the course content that related to developing coaches understanding of the A-C relationship. A total of 5 documents were analysed, totalling 114 pages. Alongside this, 328 PowerPoint presentation slides from 14 workshops were analysed, that form part of the FA’s UEFA B Licence course. All course tasks required to complete the FA’s UEFA A Coaching Licence, documented on 44 PowerPoint slides, were also analysed.

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| UEFA B License Syllabus |
| UEFA A Licence syllabus |
| The FA UEFA B License workshop PowerPoint slides |
| The FA UEFA A Licence PowerPoint slides containing all course tasks |
| The FA UEFA A License Learner Journal |
| The FA UEFA B License Coach Competency Framework |
| The FA UEFA A License Coach Competency Framework |

Table 3. Documents analysed

**Data analysis**

Data was analysed using inductive reflexive thematic analysis given recommendations for use in qualitative descriptive methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2019). NVivo software was used to code and manage data. Thematic analysis was utilised as it is an accessible method to identify patterns in qualitative data whilst also maintaining theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis was carried out by following the step-by-step guide outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013).

Audio recorded interview data was immediately transcribed with minor changes to ensure clarity and anonymity of the participants. Familiarisation began by listening to the audio recording and reading each transcribed interview. Initial succinct codes were then generated which provided preliminary categories. Categories were then collated into five provisional themes. Examples of provisional themes included “The importance of interpersonal communication within the A-C relationship”, “The importance of understanding personal values within the A-C relationship” and “The dominance of professional knowledge in UEFA courses”. Provisional themes were carefully reviewed by checking back to the entire data set. During the process the team sought to reflexively consider the data whilst being mindful of their own subjectivity. For example, the lead author has completed both the UEFA B and UEFA A Coaching Licences through the English FA’s Coaching Pathway and these subjective experiences were relevant to the coding process. To encourage a reflexive consideration, throughout the analysis the second author acted as a ‘critical friend’, thereby challenging the first author’s understanding and perception of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The second author’s expertise in sports psychology allowed them to highlight the need for the inclusion of sub themes to capture the adoption of pseudoscientific concepts within the course curricula. Other examples of the influence of a critical friend included emphasising significant quotes linking to the importance of the coaches’ intrapersonal skills in developing high quality A-C relationships. Overarching themes were then summarised by writing a detailed description which captured their essence and meaning. Finally, the writing involved using the participants’ accounts to present their perceptions of the courses relating to the key aims of the research,. Given the emphasis on coach developers’ understandings and perceptions, the data was approached ‘theory free.’

For the document analysis, initially, we identified meaningful and relevant passages based on our three central research questions (Bowen, 2009). Documents were annotated and coded based on whether they evidenced the development of professional, interpersonal or intrapersonal knowledge. An example of this is our coding of workshops in the UEFA B Licence in Table 4. Any documents which made specific reference to the A-C relationship were also categorised. Following the recommendations of Bowen (2009), the themes developed through the semi-structured interviews were also applied to the analysis of documents. This enabled a more rigorous approach and allowed us to compare and substantiate interview data against the content of the documents.

**Rigour**

Rigour was conceived in terms of Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) criteria with a particular emphasis on a worthy topic, rich rigour, and meaningful coherence. Purposeful sampling was utilised to ensure the most appropriate practitioners were recruited to fully answer the key research questions providing rich rigour and coherence. Methodological rigour was ensured by conducting a pilot interview. Feedback was provided with regards to sequencing of questioning and the clarity of wording and minor adjustments were made. An example of a change in the order of the interview guide was the addition of a question which encouraged the participants to reflect on high quality A-C relationships they had experienced, prior to then discussing the key skills and attributes required by the coach. The revised interview schedule was used and in line with the recommendations of Tracy and Hinrichs (2017), the number and mean length of interviews are reported

During the analysis of these interviews a relativist perspective was adopted. Consistent with this there is an acceptance that subjectivity will influence data interpretation. Reflexivity was encouraged by co-authors acting as a critical friend, which served to challenge the interpretations made and explore alternative explanations (Smith & McGannon, 2018). An example of this was the notion of ‘care’ within the A-C relationship. Co-authors encouraged the lead author to critically analyse the different conceptions of this worthy topic and how it may be understood within high performance environments. Providing substantial examples from the data provides meaningful coherence and facilitates naturalistic generalisability enabling the reader to draw their own conclusions from the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

**Findings and discussion**

There are five themes in this section. Theme one and two relate to our first two research questions, respectively. Theme three, four and five align to our third research question.

**Theme 1: Coach developers understand the A-C relationship is built on trust, care and hard and soft interpersonal approaches**

It was important that we explored the coach developers understanding of the A-C relationship, given they play an integral role in the course delivery and their knowledge and understanding would shape the course. We encouraged the coach developers to reflect on their vast experiences within coaching, to better exemplify these characteristics. The coach developers believed high quality relationships were built on trust, care and the use of hard and soft interpersonal approaches by the coach.

***Trust***

Coach developer described how a trust-based relationship would enable a coach to assist

the athlete to develop and improve.

“So, I think the biggest characteristic would be honesty, and the honesty probably builds the trusting relationship between the coach and a player. If you've got the trust between each other that you are trying to help them, you try to develop them or what you tell them is true. I think you need that honesty and trust as a foundation. Without that, I don't think they sort of buy into you as a coach and you struggle to help them as a player.” (Mark)

“I think it's really important that we establish a culture where there is trust and respect and that's going to be earned and so I think it's a given that that needs to happen with players and coaches. Because if you want the players to be good performers, they've got to buy in to what it is you're trying to achieve with them. And within that, there’s a lot of core values start to come in about, for example, trust. It requires respect and listening. “(Ste)

Coach developers believe coaches must develop trusting relationships with athletes and our research adds to the existing literature which positions trust as a key indicator of high-quality A-C relationships and subsequently athletic performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Trust is built upon the athlete believing the coach will fulfil their commitment to the relationship (Kao et al., 2017). Fulfilling their commitment requires the coach not only to demonstrate competence, but, as Ste describes, also communicating this effectively to players to encourage them to commit to a trusting relationship. Kao et al. (2017) found that trust between coach and athlete was impacted by coach competency in four areas; motivation (capacity to motivate athletes), game strategy (tactical strategy during competition), technique (instruction and feedback during training session) and character building (positive attitude towards sports).

***Care***

Several participants described the importance of coaches developing a strong understanding of the notion of care in order to develop a relationship founded on trust.

Caring, looking after them. So their welfare is in my hands and they will be looked after, regardless. There is a genuine warmth towards seeing an improvement. Because the players have got to see and feel…it’s a feeling they’ll get. If they sense you care for them, they’ll want to come back. You’re adding value to their life. (Rob)

This notion of building caring relationships was a key theme within our findings even though it appears to be at odds with the harsh and competitive environment portrayed within high performance football settings (Cronin et al., 2020). Recent research has drawn upon Noddings’ theory of care, to better understand how coaches can develop caring relationships with athletes (Noddings, 1988). To ‘care for’ an athlete is characterised by engrossment (sustained attention), motivational displacement (meeting the athlete’s needs ahead of that of the coach’s) and reciprocity (the care is acknowledged by the athlete). Cronin and Armour (2018) argue that when coaching is done well it is a caring activity where athletes flourish as people and performers. Data from the coach developers support this position.

***Hard and soft interpersonal approaches***

Coach developers provided a nuanced account of relationships with former coaches who also adopted more robust interpersonal approaches within the A-C relationship.

“So when I was a player with (Youth Team Coach) in those days, the coaches were stern, they weren’t your mate that was for sure. You know, you were a bit in fear of them a little bit. But you respected them massively. Now I respected him because everything he said happened on the pitch.” (Mike)

Mike describes harder interpersonal approaches as being an integral part of the A-C relationship. This may be specific to high performance environments. This resonates with the work of Taylor et al. (2022) who argues the importance of the coach providing ‘tough love’ within these high-performance environments. ‘Harder’ interpersonal approaches include players being accountable to high standards, robust feedback processes, clarifying expectations and attention to detail. Similarly, Sarkar and Page (2022) focus on the notion of challenge and support to create the optimum environment for athletes to thrive. Challenge refers to high expectations to build accountability and responsibility and support focuses on promoting learning and building trust. Taylor and Collins (2022) argue that high performing athletes may want or require coaches to adopt a more robust approach. They argue that if development environments are too caring they may not prepare athletes for the realities of the senior professional game where there will always be consequences for poor performance (Taylor et al., 2022). Taylor et al. (2022) seeks to direct our attention towards the potential downsides to “softer” interpersonal approaches, such as athletes performing with reduced accountability. Instead, it may be the case that care, within high performance environments, may be perceived by ambitious athletes as an investment of time and effort from the coach in the athlete’s development (Taylor et al., 2022).

However, Cronin et al. (2020) are clear that ‘caring’ coaching does not simply involve coaches pandering incessantly to the ‘wants’ of athletes. Instead, it involves using their knowledge and expertise alongside constructive dialogue to meet the expressed ‘needs’ of the athletes they work with. This will, without doubt, involve providing elevated levels of challenge and requires accountability from the athlete, but these processes should operate within a relationship rooted in care. This is a sentiment Mike also expresses.

“(First Team Manager) had the same thing (referring to demonstrating “sterness”), he did the same, but he had the real care. It was a sort of…a little bit you, you didn't want to let him down, for sure, you didn't want the hairdryer. But you also had the massive respect because this guy was giving you an opportunity. So you wanted to work hard for him and so on.” (Mike)

Critically, it is important to recognise that Mike’s understanding of high-quality A-C relationships may be shaped by survivor bias. Mike had a relatively successful career as a player and, subsequently, he was provided with coaching opportunities and mentored by the very coaches that he is now reflecting upon. These ‘harder’ interpersonal approaches may have been perceived differently by other athletes and Cronin (2022) rightly points to the fact that, for some, ‘tough love’ may be used as an excuse for abusive coaching practices.

Coach developers understanding of the A-C relationship, is that coaches developing a strong understanding of the notions of trust and care are integral ingredients. But they believe, in high performance environments, these relationships are characterised by coaches also demonstrating ‘emotional elasticity’ to balance “harder” and “softer” interpersonal approaches which provide athletes with clear direction and hold them to high standards.

**Theme 2: The triad of knowledge impacts on the A-C relationship, not just interpersonal knowledge**

This section related to our second research question of the study, which explores what coach developers perceive to be the important knowledge required for coaches to be proficient at developing and maintaining high quality A-C relationships in a high-performance footballing setting. Coach developers were, again, encouraged to exemplify their points by using practical examples. They believed coaches needed to enhance their professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, all of which operate in an integrated manner, in order to become competent at fostering high quality relationships with athletes.

***Intrapersonal knowledge***

Coach developers believed developing a strong understanding of personal values to be a critical skill in shaping a coach’s interaction and relationship with athletes.

“It's the biggest challenge of all is working across your own beliefs, across your own values and what you believe to be right. How you should treat people…it's challenging.” (Rob)

“So you have a feeling of what good support and good development of people looks like which links back to your own values and philosophy of how you’ve been brought up.” (John)

Côté and Gilbert (2009) position intrapersonal skills as a pivotal element that enables coaches to manage relationships with their athletes and describe how the development of reflective skills aids self-understanding for coaches. Ferrar et al. (2018) highlights the connection between understanding of the self and the impact on others when asserting “Our case studies show that while having a deep understanding of oneself is crucial, it is not the entire equation. Coaches must recognise how their actions and behaviours impact all of their athletes, and adjust appropriately” (p. 69). The coach developers believed a key element of this self-understanding involves coaches developing a clear and robust knowledge of their own values which helps to shape their interactions with athletes.

***Interpersonal knowledge***

The importance of coaches’ developing strong communication skills to foster high quality A-C relationships, was a key theme.

“Communication, versatility of communication, that will be probably something I repeat loads of times I would have thought in this particular discussion. An ability to transmit your message to a wide range of people with clarity. The best coaches that I see have that ability and I think it's a real, it's a real skill that we don't work on enough.” (Andy)

Martindale et al. (2007) found open and honest communication was crucial in developing relationships and, importantly, enabled the building of trust between the coach and the athlete. However, Mike was keen to highlight that interpersonal skills need to be underpinned by high levels of professional knowledge and used an example of a coach he had played for to exemplify this.

“It wasn't like he was pally with you, it was not laughing and joking. You know, you were slightly afraid but you knew he taught you the fundamentals that you needed for a lifetime in football. So, you know you could have somebody else who is a really nice great person, you really get on well with them but they don't do that. So, they're not like…they're not that useful to you. They might be a great guy, you know so there's got to be a balance of both (professional and interpersonal skills).” (Mike).

Without strong professional knowledge, athletes may perceive a coach as a nice person but somebody who is unable to improve and develop them, which would likely undermine the quality of the A-C relationship. However, these findings point to a broader challenge around defining interpersonal skills within a sports coaching context. His explanation may point to an understanding of a coaches’ interpersonal skills which is both restrictive and over-simplistic. These skills are more complex than simply being a “great person” or deemed as being “pally.” Gilbert and Côté (2013) understand coaches’ interpersonal skills as their ability to identify, use, understand and manage emotions. We believe further research is required to capture the broad nature of interpersonal skills required by coaches to be successful within high performance environments. Further conceptualisation is required which captures the nuance and complexity of these skills, specific to coaches operating in high performance environments, so they can be targeted through formal coach education.

***Professional knowledge***

When reflecting back on his own experience as a player, Mike believes professional knowledge was an integral aspect of the high-quality relationships he shared with coaches.

“They’ve got to be good at coaching (technical and tactical). You know, they've got to be good at making the game simple and clear so that you get the messages. You know because the biggest thing the player wants to do is progress. Now I respected him (previous coach) because everything he said happened on the pitch. If he said we come short to go long, it worked. Everything he said worked. Everything made sense and it was clear and easy. Not easy, but he made it simple and work really well. So, you were really happy with him.” (Mike)

Jowett and Cockerill (2003) criticises coach education courses for focusing too heavily on professional knowledge instead of “providing coaches with information that would assist them to develop effective relationships with their athletes” (p. 328). This falsely assumes that professional knowledge is not an effective A-C relationship building skill. It creates a kind of false dichotomy, whereby coaches can either develop technical and tactical skills or build relationships. Mike describes how he perceives high quality A-C relationships as being underpinned by trust in the coaches’ ability to enable the athlete to progress and flourish, with professional knowledge being integral in this process. Mike’s responses resonated with the work of Potrac et al. (2002) who explored ‘power’ and ‘social role’ using the work of Goffman (1959). They portray athletes, within performance settings, as highly demanding of the coach and, subsequently, if the athlete does not perceive a coach to have the professional knowledge to enable them to progress, the relationship will deteriorate. They use the work of Goffman (1959) to explain how the coach must seek to present themselves as competent, with professional knowledge used as a key vehicle upon which to display their capabilities. Mike describes how professional knowledge, for the coach to ‘read the game’, worked in an integrated manner with pedagogical and interpersonal skills in order to communicate this information in a “clear and easy” manner for players to digest.

Our findings re-assert the importance of a coach’s professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge operating in an integrated manner (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). It is a combination of these skills that facilitates the development and maintenance of high-quality A-C relationships.

**Theme 3: The A-C relationship is not meaningfully addressed in the formalised course content**

This section relates to our third research question which is to assess how the topic of the A-C relationship integrated within the current FA UEFA A and B Licence courses. It specifically focuses on the content that is delivered during face-to-face, on course, contact days.

***The A-C relationship is not formalised within the course curriculum***

Methods of delivery and assessment included PowerPoint presentations, workshops, pre and post course tasks, group discussion, reflection tasks, in situ visits, practical coaching sessions and a final project and presentation. Course content was largely delivered by staff with a technical coaching background, but the UEFA A Licence course also involved the use of guest speakers and sports science specialists. None of the coach developers reported the A-C relationship as being formalised as a stand-alone workshop, the focus of a specific assignment or targeted formally within the teaching on the courses. This is reflected in Lee’s comments relating to the UEFA B license qualification.

“It doesn't (does the A-C relationship get covered formally within the course content?) ...there's no particular workshops. I would say it's probably more of a subtle aspect of the course. But probably we get overwhelmed with the technical and tactical corners, to be honest with you. Yeah, I just feel that that the four corners is something that we could really improve upon. And again, it comes back round, in my opinion, to trying to squeeze too much into a course and not recognising that we can learn through a number of different elements and aspects. Probably with the courses at the moment we've taken an approach where we squeeze a lot in just in case coaches need it. And so I think, I think the athlete-coach relationship, probably in situ (coach educator visits the coach in their own setting). I think coaches will probably get more when they're in situ. I think, on course itself, they’ll be stuff that gets mentioned. I'm not really sure how beneficial it is in the format we’re in at the moment. I sound quite critical don’t I, but I always want us to be better!” (Lee)

This was supported by the findings of our document analysis (Table 4). Having analysed the PowerPoints from 14 workshops on the UEFA B qualification, they focused primarily on the development of professional knowledge. The workshops do integrate the four-corner model, which offers a broader conceptualisation of the impact of coaching and the potential outcomes for the athlete (Chapman et al. 2020). The workshops also contained reflective tasks, which requires the coaches to review, for example, a session they had delivered, However, this is largely with a view to developing professional knowledge. The A-C relationship is briefly touched upon in workshop 2 which contained a task that required coaches to “In pairs or groups of three, discuss the questions posed by the prompt cards”. There were 11 cards which focused on a variety of topics. One of the cards asked the coaches to discuss “How do you develop relationships and trust within your players and team?.” The task was delivered in the process of attempting, through the workshop, to understand the FA four corner model for long term player development. However, none of the workshops primarily targeted the topic of the A-C relationship, made reference to the A-C relationship in the learning outcomes or had integrated any research-based content on this topic. This was also the case in the syllabus for A and B License qualification, designed by UEFA, which sets out the minimum content required to be delivered by each country’s NGB. Although broad in its diversification from traditional professional knowledge, it makes no mention of the A-C relationships. Our findings suggest that although academic research has developed our understanding of the characteristics of high-quality A-C relationships and the practical strategies that may be used by coaches to develop and maintain these relationships, this research appears not to have made it to the front line of formal coach education in high performance football in England.

Other coach developers suggest that content related to the A-C relationship is implicitly, rather than explicitly, integrated into the courses.

“So, I think this is done on more on an informal. I think we just show good practice. So, there's obviously good practice within when we deliver practically. There's good practice the way that we facilitate group work…So, so showing good practice and how you would work and develop relationships. Just as simple as you, you have a group for the first time on A licence coming in to provide some work to show the candidate. It's how you then try and create rapport with the individual players in the group, whether that may be in a you know, initial greeting, asking about the individual just one to one, maybe having a laugh and a joke with the group at a certain stage just to lighten the atmosphere. Initially, in the session, pointing out really good practice, which again, increases your self-esteem, which increases motivation, which then brings the whole session to a new level. The way that you structure the session for enjoyment and motivation, high ball rolling, not standing around too much. Engaging the players with questions linked into the idea that if you get the wrong answer, you ask the wrong question. So, let's ask another one. So, you should really just be showing good practice.” (John)

John appears to be conflating a basic superficial level of rapport with athletes with the complex and multifaceted nature of the A-C relationship and describes how these skills can be modelled informally. Rossi and Cassidy (1999) argue that modelling may be beneficial because this approach may allow valuable information to be transferred between teacher and learners. Learners may not, however, be clear on how to apply this knowledge in the context of their own practice. Nelson et al. (2006) also criticises the artificial nature of the practical delivery in many of these courses, claiming the use of peers or guest teams does not provide a realistic platform from which to observe and deliver the coaching process. These practices may be problematic because high quality A-C relationships require time and authenticity and are highly contextualised based on the given individuals and environment (Jowett, 2007). The approach described, of modelling through practical delivery, may not capture the complexity of the topic and may fail to integrate up to date applied research which could benefit coaches. Without explicitly teaching the underlying strategies, coaches may struggle to develop high quality relationships in their own context.

***A broader curriculum***

Despite the A-C relationship not being formalised within the course curriculum, coach developers painted a picture of courses that, in recent times, have broadened their outlook and adopted a multi-disciplinary approach.

“I think, currently, it's probably as much emphasis placed on it as I can remember. So certainly, you know, the psychological component. You know, as part of some of the blocks that we do, where there's a lot of work done on reflection, reflecting models, understanding different personality types. And it's not necessarily everybody's cup of tea, those type of models and different behaviours and personality types. But there's certainly reference to that. And probably getting, you know, getting coaches to really reflect on the way that they communicate and connect. So, I think there's a much bigger part played now on the current UEFA A Licence as it stands.” (Andy)

Andy describes courses that have adopted an increased focus on the psychological components of coaching. This is supported by our analysis of the UEFA A learners journal (Figure 1), which outlines the course outcomes. Although heavily focused on professional knowledge it does aim to develop “reflection skills” and “self-awareness” amongst coaches. Although, noticeably, it makes no mention of developing knowledge of the A-C relationship. Our findings resonate with the work of Chapman et al. (2020) who analysed the changing nature of FA formal coach education from 1967 to the modern day. They explain a shift in the mid 1990’s with the development of a new generation of courses

Table 4. Document analysis of 14 UEFA B License workshops

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| No. | Title | Learning Outcomes (as set out within PowerPoint) | Primary disciplinary knowledge | Is the A-C relationship addressed? |
| 1 | Introduction to the FA UEFA B in Coaching Football | Share ideas and experiences from our own context and journey to date.  Establish our individual start point. | N/A | No |
| 2 | The future Player | Consider player development from an FA 4 Corner Development Model perspective.  Discuss how integrated coaching aids player development.  Recognise the impact of integrated coaching across practice/competition.  Undertake player and team profiling activities. | Professional Interpersonal intrapersonal | Yes |
| 3 | How we play | England DNA & Principles of Play – Theory and Practical | Professional | No |
| 4 | The Future Player –  Working with the Individual | Retain & Build playing out from the back including the goalkeeper  Introduce tactics, supporting teams strategies  Design practices linked to session objective incorporating the goalkeeper.  Consider the role of the goalkeeper within units of the team. | Professional | No |
| 5 | The Future Player –  Working with the individual | Winning the ball high up the pitch in the attacking third  Introduce tactics, supporting teams strategies  Design practices linked to session objective incorporating the goalkeeper.  Consider the role of the goalkeeper within units of the team. | Professional | No |
| 6 | Journey review | Plan-Do-Review – Time to reflect and take a moment  Identify your own strategies, tactics and primary players to inform team programme.  Review where you are now.  Action planning. | Professional | No |
| 7 | Plan do review | Review coaching behaviours and practice – focus on organisation and constraints to support Technical/Tactical and Physical corner intentions  Revisiting Principles of play in relation to individuals and units of players. Focusing on Playing into Midfield.  Consider Relationship between four corners and player development. | Professional | No |
| 8 | The Future Player – Units with Units | Commence planning a medium-term coaching programme.  Review your coaching behaviour and practice.  Consider Relationship between four corners and player development.  Explore Principles of play in relation to individuals and units of players.  Identify your coaching strengths and areas for development. | Professional | No |
| 9 | Units with Units | Building upon Principles of Play in relation to 'Tactics to support strategies’. Focus upon Out of Possession – Midfield areas  Building upon Behaviours and practice – organisation and constraints to support Technical/Tactical and Physical corner intentions to develop Individuals and Units.  Relationship between the FA four Corners when planning and delivering Defending within the Midfield third. | Professional | No |
| 10 | Review and plan | Commence planning a medium-term coaching programme.  Review your coaching behaviour and practice.  Identify intentions across the FA four corners for your players.  Identify how Principles of play in relation to individuals and units of players can support technical/tactical development your players.  Identify your coaching strengths and areas for development. | Professional | No |
| 11 | Plan Do Review | Review coaching behaviours and practice – focus on organisation and constraints to support Technical/Tactical and Physical corner intentions.  Revisiting Principles of play in relation to individuals and units working with units.  Consider Relationship between four corners and player development. | Professional | No |
| 12 | How We Coach – Blended Practice -  Units within Teams | Highlight a variety of considerations when designing a practice for units within the team  Relate the Plan, Do, Review cycle to our own coaching context  Design and deliver a practice focusing on units of players within the team  Observe delivery of a practice focusing on units of players within the team | Professional | No |
| 13 | Plan Do Review | Continue the theme of developing practices around units within the team  Plan and deliver game-related practices linking units of players within the team  Consider in and out of possession, and transition priorities | Professional | No |
| 14 | Team and Match Analysis | Unpack how profiling and analysis can support training and match-day preparation  Review coaching project and action plan for post block 3 progress. | Professional | No |

adopting a broader conceptualisation of coaching to address the social and psychological needs of the player.

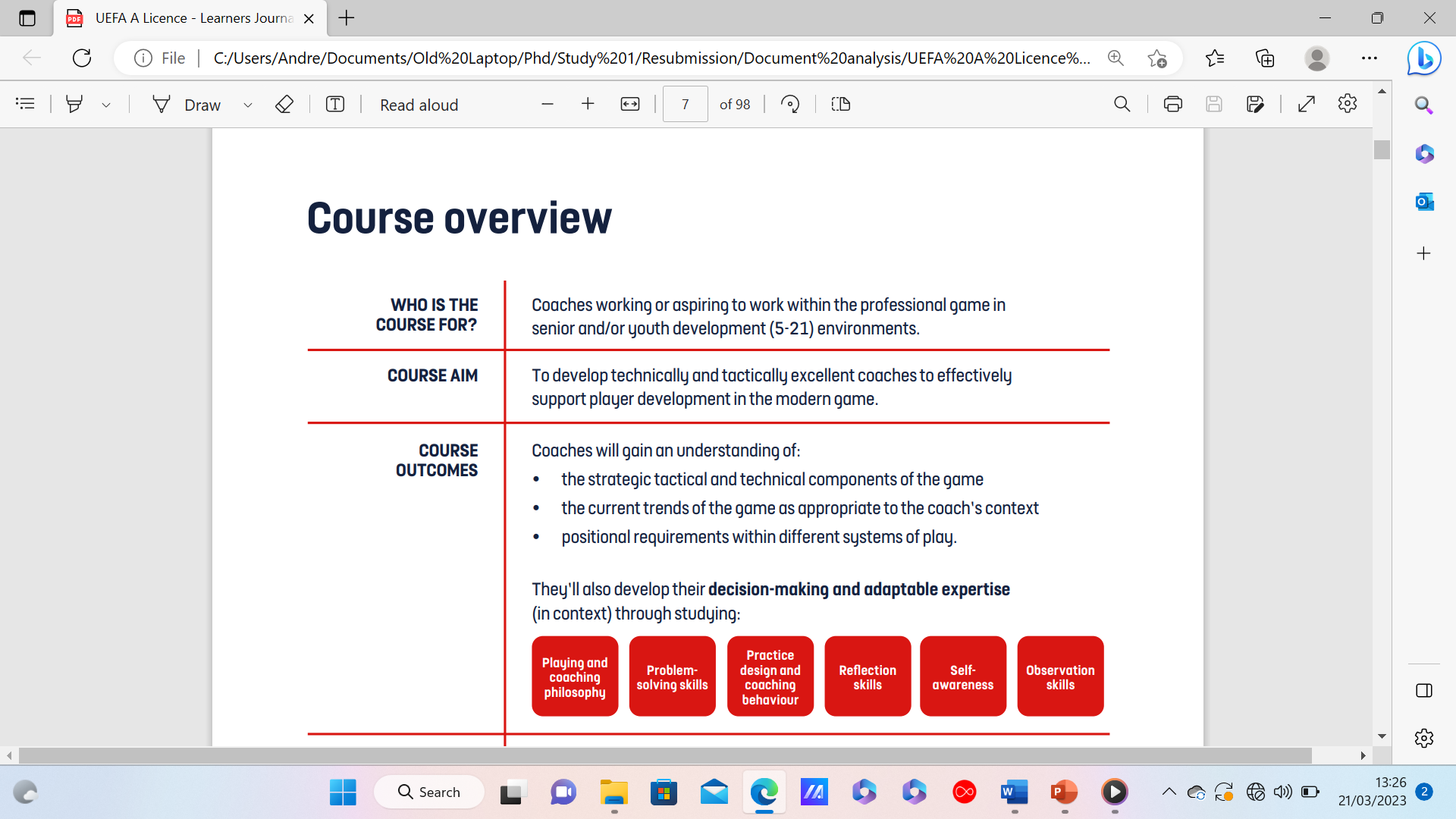


Figure 1. Course outcomes for the UEFA A Coaching License from the learners journal document

In an attempt to develop social and psychological skills, coach developers described workshops which focused on personality types and utilised Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to help coaches better understand their own personality traits and that of their players. Despite being extensively used in educational and business settings, it is not widely endorsed as a rigorous model (Christiansen & Tett, 2013). In fact, Domino and Domino (2006) describe the model as being based on ‘Jung’s typology of personality’ which has “long being discarded by psychological science” (p. 641). In line with the recommendations of Piggot (2015), where formal coach education courses seek to evolve and integrate psycho-social components of coaching, it is imperative the work presented to candidates is up to date and rigorous. Alongside this, coach developers outlined challenges regarding the practicalities of delivering a broader curriculum, particularly if they were not familiar with the content. If the A-C relationship is to be more heavily integrated within course curricula, it must be evidence based and not allow space for pseudoscience to infiltrate and coach developers must be supported to deliver this content effectively.

***Continued dominance of professional knowledge***

Despite these enhancements coach developers still describe an intense focus on professional knowledge within the courses.

“Certainly, you know, the County FA I was working with I think the learners get bogged down with a technical/tactical sort of understanding of shapes and systems and roles and responsibilities, as opposed to understanding the players and how to get more out of players.” (Mark)

“It starts with awareness for me you've got to…. the coach has to be aware of the importance of it in order to then develop it and target it. And I think, you know, football, quite rightly places a massive emphasis on technical tactical development of players. Of course it does, and knowledge and game understanding. Of course it does and so it should. I'm not sure it places as much importance on messaging and the ability to communicate that. I'm not convinced it does as an industry I'm talking about. And yeah, I think it's crucial. Absolutely crucial.” (Andy)

These findings are unsurprising given that the importance of developing the professional knowledge of coaches is so well established (Bloom et al., 1999). The current research certainly does not seek to underplay the importance of professional knowledge, believing it should be at the heart of formal coach education programmes. In fact, we contend that the importance of the coaches’ professional knowledge within the A-C relationship, particularly in high performance environments, has been underplayed. Wherever the topic of the A-C relationship is integrated within formal coach education, the importance of professional knowledge should be a key part of the messaging to candidates. However, as already discussed in this paper, relationship building skills are diverse, with high quality A-C relationships requiring a coach’s professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge to work in an integrated manner. We do not regard the content of coach development programmes to be a question of ‘either/or’, or that professional knowledge should in some way be diluted. The point is for courses to address the A-C relationship in a meaningful and impactful way, which is research informed, and allows coaches to utilise this content in their day-to-day practice.

**Theme 4: In situ visits provide an effective medium to develop knowledge of the A-C relationship**

This theme continues to explore our third research question, assessing how the topic of the A-C relationship is integrated within the courses, but specifically focuses on the in-situ element of the courses. Coach developers believed that visiting the coaches in their own coaching environments, known as ‘in situ’ visits, was one of the most productive methods in helping coaches to develop their understanding of the A-C relationship.

The coach developers described how these visits provided more authentic opportunities to see the coaches in action.

“When the in-situs were introduced, I thought it was a fantastic idea. Because you see them coach in the real world or in their real world, as opposed to with the adults on the course who will behave perfectly or do whatever they want and that falseness.” (Mark)

Coach developers considered ‘in situ’ visits as an opportunity for them to capture the real-life challenges athletes can present to coaches. This resonates with the work of Chapman et al. (2020) who describes how ‘in situ’ visits help “situate learning in the lives of the coaches” (p. 2). This may be particularly relevant when focusing on aspects of coaching practice such as the A-C relationship, which may be viewed by candidates as being abstract and highly personal.

These views were echoed by Tony.

“But now we actually go out and observe an in-situ practice with their own team and that gives me an opportunity to feedback and see whether they've got good relationships with the players, and how they communicate with the players, how they manage them.” (Tony)

Coach developers describe how using these real-life examples acted as a catalyst by which to frame discussions, relevant to the A-C relationship, with candidates. This concurs with the views of Chapman et al. (2020) who describes how in-situ visits enable learning to be more personal, and include regular opportunities for reflection, in which coaches can consider the relevance of new knowledge to their own practice. Tony specifically reflects on the opportunity to provide feedback to coaches on the nature of their interactions and overall relationship with the players they coach. However, if content relating to the A-C relationship is not targeted and formalised in the course curriculum then the impact of this feedback and the shared reflections may be limited. For example, if coaches engaged in workshops on the courses which presented them with up to date and rigorous research focusing on the A-C relationships, these in-situ visits and subsequent feedback would be more likely to be framed by this content and therefore may be more impactful.

**Theme 5: The assessment framework does not align with the formalised course content**

Our last theme again focuses on our third research question, but specifically explores the courses assessment framework. Relating to the A-C relationship, the content of the Coach Competency Framework does not necessarily align with the formalised course content.

In situ visits from coach developers form a key part of the assessment process on both courses. As part of our document analysis we assessed the FA’s “Coach Competency Framework” (Figure 2) used for the UEFA A and B qualifications. These documents provide a basis for which coach developers can assess and feedback on the abilities of the coach against a set of pre-determined competencies. “Building Relationships” is listed as a key competency within the FA Coach Competency Framework for the UEFA A and B Coaching Licences. Given content relating to the A-C relationship does not significantly feature on either course, this would point to an apparent incongruence between the course curriculum and the coach competencies being assessed.

Coaches were subsequently questioned on the behaviours they looked for in order to assess coaches against the competency relating to “Building Relationships”.

“I like getting there early. Early is good for me. Not because I like being punctual. Because there is lots of signals given away about what’s happened and what is to come next. I’m watching what interactions are taking place as the player is actually coming through the gate or walking up the path. How does the coach deliver that first interaction? With energy? Is it with lethargy? Is it dour? That gives away a great deal. The coaches demeanour, how they communicate verbally, choice of language, tonality, volume…smiles, touches and connection, thumbs up.” (Rob)

Rob also explained how he continues to assess the coach’s ability to build relationships during the coaching session.

“It’s a constant (assessing the A-C relationship throughout the session), now once the session has started we’ve got to have a bit more content. If you don’t have the connection they are going to switch off. That connection gets you closer. Now we can start putting in a bit of layers of detail. The real value comes from players thinking that was the best coach I have ever had because he helped me learn. In the session it could be picking off individuals and meeting their needs of what is required for that specific age and position. The player can come off with some information that helps them.” (Rob)

Rob describes observing the coach’s interpersonal behaviours, and the athletes reactions, before and after the main coaching session as integral in assessing their competency at building relationships. However, he also focuses on the relationship building skills that happen during the coaching session. If competent, the coach would demonstrate well-developed professional technical and tactical knowledge combined with strong interpersonal skills. This is ultimately about the coach having the knowledge to meet the needs of the athlete, as outlined by Cronin et al. (2020). Within a high-performance setting, the needs of the athlete would be focused on a strong desire to progress and improve (Taylor et al., 2022). Professional knowledge is integral in underpinning a high-quality A-C relationship within performance settings.

Other coach developers describe assessing and feeding back to coaches on the A-C relationship competencies as challenging.

If you are now talking about what is my understanding of the theory and of the background of the A-C relationship, probably not great. Because I’ve been doing it so long I just seem to have an idea of what works and what doesn’t. (John)

“I don't think I'm qualified, as highly qualified as I am, as a coach educated teacher, sports teacher, whatever. I don't think I'm qualified to look on the psychological side of how you deal with every player's needs” (Tony)

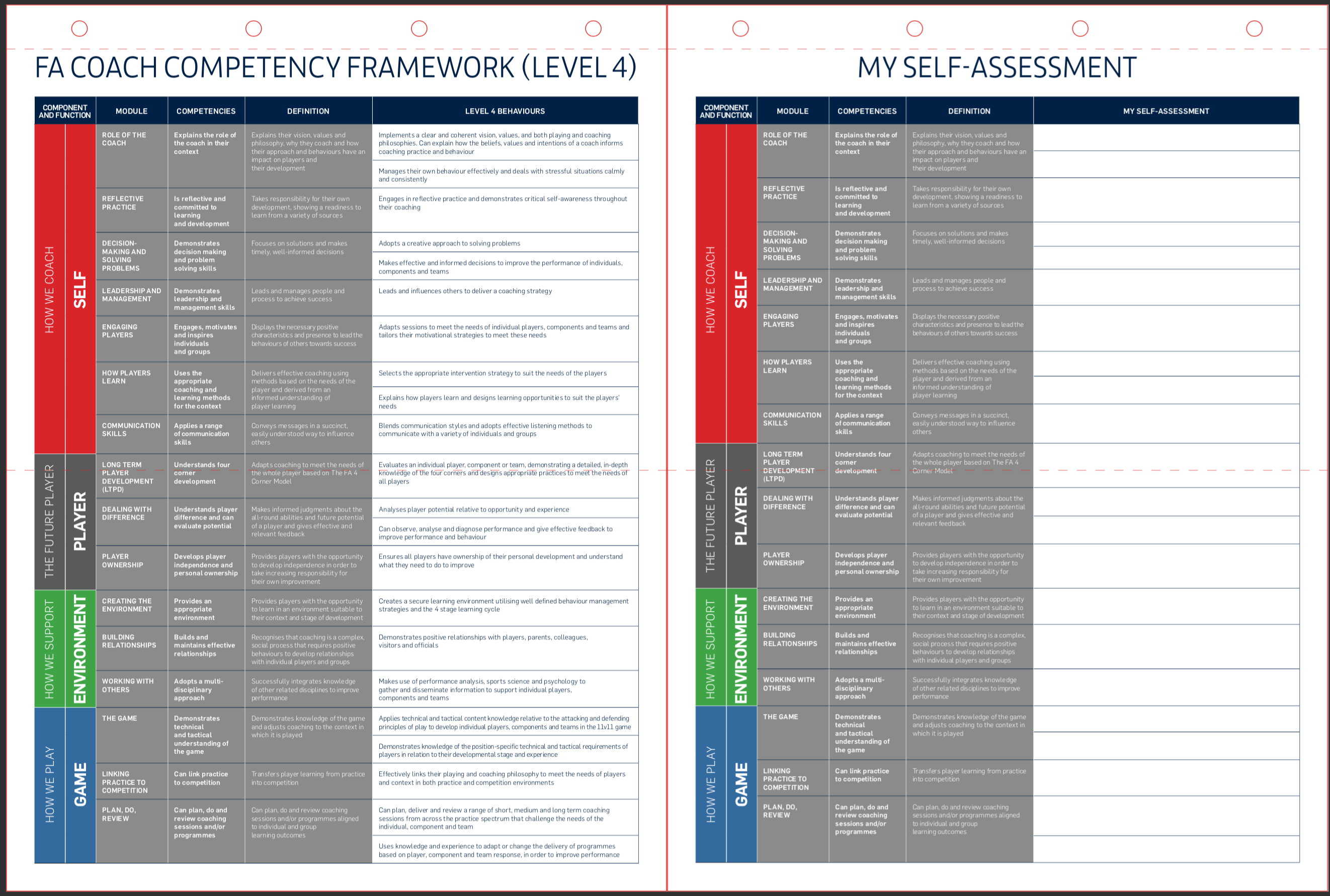


Figure 2. The FA Coach Competency Framework for the UEFA A License course

This challenge is not specific to sports coaching with other professions such as nursing describing proficiencies, such as interpersonal skills, as difficult to define and uncomfortable to assess (Meier et al., 2014). John suggested his knowledge of the A-C relationship is tacit, but generally there appears to be a lack of clarity as to the exact behaviours required for coaches to be deemed competent at “building relationships” with athletes. There was also a feeling amongst coaches that these skills are harder to develop within coaches.

“If I was helping a coach, I probably could help them and tell them what they need to do tactically or technically and I could tell them with what they need to do personally. But I think people find it harder to change or develop their personal skills.” (Mark)

This is contrary to research that has successfully targeted these skills for development (Ferrar et al., 2018). Most recently, Ferrar et al. (2018) captured the learning journeys of high-performance archery and cycling coaches who attended a coach development seminar through the United States Olympics Committee’s Leadership Programme. The programme specifically focused on the development of coaches’ relationship building knowledge and skills and captured positive accounts of the impact of the seminar from both the coach’s and athlete’s perspective. After completing the programme, coaches were better able to adapt their communication, develop self-awareness and build team culture, all of which helped to develop and maintain high quality relationships with the athletes they coach.

Despite these challenges some coaches suggested it was those coaches that were most effective at developing high quality A-C relationships as their most competent on UEFA courses.

The best learners or the best candidates I've had on the course, are the ones who've got those skills. And I often say to them, this is something that we don't give you, but your relationship with the players is fantastic. They hang on every word you say, they trust you. (Mark)

Rob was also keen to emphasise the importance of these skills.

The building of the relationships and how that connection takes place…That is the starting point if you don’t build that how are we going to make people feel good about themselves? That should be…where they put in 5 or 6 further down (on the Coach Competency Framework). That should be big and bold and stuck on everybody’s forehead! That’s including bloody coach educators! (Rob)

Coach developers acknowledge these skills as being a critical, differentiating feature of high-performance coaches. They are considered to be a key quality, identified in the most able of those who attend their UEFA courses. But in contrast, these skills are also, characterised as somewhat intangible and elusive, whilst also being difficult to feedback on and challenging to assess.

**Strength and Limitations**

Our research is based on the perceptions of a limited, albeit well informed, group of coach developers and course designers. It captures the participants experiences of working on the front line in high performance, football based, coach education in England. However, the participants views may not be representative of all coach developers currently working within the FA and generalisations of the findings may therefore be limited. The research, also, does not capture the views of the course candidates who will, no doubt, have their own unique reflections on their experiences of the course and its content. Despite this, football coach education in England is well established over many decades and it may be the case that our findings are reasonably likely to be replicated in large scale coach education programmes across other nations and sports. At the very least, our work provides a starting point upon which to develop further research within other contexts.

**Conclusion**

Researchers have argued that the A-C relationship had not been given sufficient coverage within formal coach education (Ferrar et al., 2018; Turnbridge & Côté, 2017). Our key findings add to our understanding by demonstrating that;

1. High quality A-C relationships, in high performance settings, are perceived by coach developers to be built on trust, care and necessitate coaches to expertly adopt ‘softer’ and ‘harder’ interpersonal approaches.
2. In order to develop high quality A-C relationships in high performance settings, coach developers believe coaches are required to develop a diverse set of attributes that incorporate and integrate professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge.
3. Formalised content relating to the A-C relationship is introduced in an implicit and superficial manner. Our findings support previous research that suggested this topic of the A-C relationship is underrepresented within formal coach education.
4. There has been diversification in the FA’s UEFA courses away from a sole focus on professional knowledge. However, where course content is diversified it has, at times, embraced pseudoscientific concepts that lack scientific validity and robustness. If the A-C relationship is to be more heavily integrated, content must be research based and coach developers must be provided relevant support to deliver and assess.
5. ‘In situ’ visits provide an effective vehicle by which to develop coaches’ knowledge relating to the A-C relationship by capturing authentic coaching experiences.
6. There is an incongruence between the content delivered on course and the assessment framework for both courses, which specifically outlines the coach’s competencies at building relationships with athletes.

Our recommendations include the integration of up to date and robust research focused on the A-C relationship to be meaningfully integrated within coach education courses. Course content should capture the complexity of the A-C relationship and focus on how coaches demonstrate care, develop trust and integrate both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ interpersonal interactions. Relationship building skills should be perceived as requiring professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge, which operate in an integrated manner. Coach developers should be liaised with and supported to integrate and deliver this more diverse content. Assessment frameworks should align to formalised course content, thereby facilitating more impactful discussions and feedback on in situ visits. Future research should further develop our understanding of the A-C relationship in high performance footballing settings, thereby shaping the content of coach education curricula to meet the needs of coaches.

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