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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,

## CONVERSATIONAL NARRATIVE ON PLAYER LEARNING

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

In recent years, scholars of coaching science have paid increasing attention to how various learning theories and concepts could be used to inform coaching practice and subsequently enhance player learning (e.g., Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Jones, 2006; Light & Wallian, 2008). While such developments are to be welcomed, there still remains a paucity of literature addressing how a theory of learning actually becomes a theory of coaching. This state of affairs is especially surprising given that the teaching and learning interface is considered to be located at the heart of coaching (Jones, 2006). Indeed, coaches across all levels of the sporting spectrum are responsible for helping players to acquire, develop, and refine their sporting attributes, skills and understandings. In addition to teaching sport specific techniques and tactics, coaches in some contexts, are also responsible for helping participants to learn how to be 'good citizens' and to adopt 'healthy lifestyles' (Bloyce & Smith, 2010).

Perhaps the point to recognise here is that there are a myriad of different ways in which coaches can teach and help players to learn and achieve desired outcomes (Jones, 2006). Like others (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Cushion et al., 2010) however, we would argue that learning theory has occupied a peripheral position in coach education and indeed coaching practice. This state of affairs could perhaps be partially attributed to the gold standard approach that has traditionally been adopted in much formal coach education provision (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). Here coach learners are often provided with, and expected to abide by, prescriptive modes of teaching players (Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010). As such it could be argued, that one of the existing weaknesses of current coach education provision, has been the failure to provide coaches with the opportunities to consider the evidence and theory that

underpins the prescribed pedagogical methods, how players may perceive and respond to these approaches, and possible alternative ways of facilitating player learning (Potrac & Cassidy, 2006).

In order to somewhat redress this situation, it is our belief that practitioners could usefully consider the philosophical assumptions and practical applications of pertinent learning theory. In this respect, it is not our intention to promote the effectiveness of one learning theory over another, rather it “is to make coaches and coach educators reflective of previously unconsidered theoretical notions, thus giving them the options to think in different ways about their practice and their consequences” (Jones, 2006, p. 4).

In terms of the structure for this particular paper, we begin with a brief theoretical introduction to two contrasting learning theories, namely behaviourism and constructivism. Here we provide an overview of the key philosophical, conceptual, and practical implications of the leading theorists associated with both orientation.

### **Behaviourist Learning Theory**

Modern theories of learning, including behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism are understandably widely reported in educational literature (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). However, prior to any synthesis regarding the epistemologies of behaviourism and constructivism, it is important to recognise that they are both considered to be a theory of learning and not a theory of teaching (Fosnot, 1996). According to Tennant (2006), the inception of behaviourism can be traced back to John Watson’s 1913 paper ‘Psychology as the behaviorist views it’. In that article, Watson argued that psychology would do well to abandon the study of inaccessible and unobservable mental events and instead focus its attentions on the investigation of behaviour. In this respect, Tennant states that Watson’s proposal was underpinned by the assumption that

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“most of our behaviour is acquired, through learning, which is to say that it is the result of environmental rather than biological influences” (p. 93). As a result of Watson’s paper, the investigation of conditions under which learning occurs became a focus for behaviourist researchers.

While many scholars have contributed to the development of behaviourist learning theory, Skinner (1904-1990) is arguably the most widely acknowledged behavioural psychologist, especially in relation to thinking about the pedagogical practice of teaching (Tennant, 2006). Skinner is most widely known for his theory of operant conditioning. According to Bernstein et al. (2008), Skinner introduced the term operant to signify a response that operates on the environment. Bernstein et al. (2008) remind us that Skinner’s theory proposes that a reinforcer increases the likelihood that an operant behaviour will occur in the future. In this respect Skinner contended that there are two types of reinforcers, namely positive reinforcers and negative reinforcers. The findings of Skinner and other leading behaviourists has clearly impacted on the field of sport psychology. For example, Smith (2006) explains how operant conditioning can be implemented to enhance athletic performance. In this respect, Smith discusses how coaches can shape athletic performance through the presentation and removal of positive (i.e., positive reinforcement, extinction, and response cost punishment) and negative (i.e., punishment and negative reinforcement) stimuli. Smith also briefly identifies the importance of schedules of reinforcement, another key component of behaviourist learning theory.

### **Constructivist Learning Theories**

Constructivism places a significant emphasis on how individuals accrue and develop their knowledge and understanding through their reflective participation in authentic situations and

interactions with others (Light & Wallian, 2008). In this regard, constructivism rejects the existence of a single reality, and instead learning is considered to be an active and interpretative process. It is widely understood that constructivism is based upon the seminal work of Dewey (1910; 1938), Piaget (1972), and Vygotsky (1962; 1978). Indeed, it is important to recognise here that the term constructivism does not refer to a single theoretical approach, but rather to a diverse range of theories of human learning (Light & Wallian, 2008). Light and Wallian (2008) are correct when they remind us that constructivism can be classified into two broad camps, namely cognitive/psychological constructivism and socio-cultural constructivism. Whilst there is commonality between these two perspectives, it is worth noting that differences between these schools of thought do exist; principally whether thinking occurs solely in the mind, the whole person, or is socially distributed (Light & Wallian, 2008). As such, in drawing upon the work of Light and Wallian (2008) have suggested the potential benefits of coaches and physical educators not feeling forced to choose between them but, instead, adopting a pragmatic approach that emphasises the dialectical relationship that exists between them.

### **A Coaching Conversation**

In keeping with recent developments regarding the use of fictional dialogues in sports coaching research (e.g., Jones, 2007; Roberts, 2014) we chose to adopt a conversational format for this paper. According to Jones (2007) “the aim of the conversational format is to assist reflection and understanding, not only of the arguments made but of our personal stance to them. It is in this invitation to reflect on the evidence encased in the differing viewpoints presented that the strength of the arrangement lies” (p. 161). In this respect, you, the reader, will inevitably 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.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The key point from this article was to encourage you, the reader, to critically reflect upon how you view player learning and attempt to facilitate it in your respective coaching practices, a process that we believe all coaches and their players could benefit from.

As both BC and CC have highlighted behaviourism and constructivism come with their respective merits and challenges. What is important here is that as coaches we understand that facilitating player learning is not a straightforward activity.

For sports coaches this situation is hampered by the reported failure of formal coach education courses to provide its participants with sufficient opportunities to develop innovative coaching practice, or to develop the essential reflective skills necessary for effective coaching (Nelson & Cushion, 2006). Furthermore Nelson, Cushion and Potrac (2006, p.251) raised concerns whether formal coach education was “training or indoctrination?” and argued for coach education teams to develop more alternative and imaginative modes of instruction, in order to help sports coaches deal with the complex and ‘messy’ reality of coaching. We would also argue that coach education should allow coaches the opportunity to consider and demonstrate their understanding of pertinent learning theories. We agree with Light (2008, p.402) in that behaviorism or constructivism cannot be condensed into a “step-by-step prescription for teaching”. It is our opinion that sports coaches would benefit from an understanding of how learning theories could improve their own and their players’ learning.

During our brief discussion we covered just two of the different theoretical approaches to learning. We did not mention humanistic approaches, cognitivism or the sociocultural aspects of learning. Therefore would we encourage further investigation into these theories of learning, and their possible application to a theory of coaching.

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