Theoretical concepts of the Coaching Process

Ian Johnston

*Seven Bridges, Vol. 6 (2018)*

**Published on:** 05/07/2018

**To cite this article:** Johnston, I. (2018) Theoretical concepts of the Coaching Process. Seven Bridges, 6, pp.17-27.

- [View the full issue.](#)
- [Submit to Seven Bridges.](#)
Theoretical concepts of the Coaching Process

Ian Johnston
BSc (Hons) Applied Sports Coaching and Development
Newcastle College

ABSTRACT
This paper is a series of critical assessments across three areas of theoretical study; Defining the Coaching Process, Questioning as a Coaching Behaviour and Modelling the Coaching Process. Research and practical implementation for each topic is far wider than can be covered in this article, with each considered from a high level together with signposts to other sources.

KEYWORDS: Coaching Process, Pedagogy, Questioning, Modelling.

DEFINING THE COACHING PROCESS
Sport science was considered to exclusively consist of physiology, sports psychology and biomechanics (Kidman and Hanrahan, 2011). The coaching process (CP) emerged in the late 1990s as an autonomous discipline as other didactic themes became prominent (Cross and Lyle, 1999). Coaches’ personal idiosyncrasies, behaviours, social, cultural, ethical and other characteristics were newly ameliorated and actively appraised (Potrac et al., 2000) alongside existing, objectively measured in-situ practice have been a catalyst for said other didactic themes increasing in prominence.

Accordant consensus regarding CP’s definition and coaching quality have not yet been fully agreed, with multiple mechanical methodologies plus abstruse social interactions coalescing as reasons for multiple non-identical definitions (Côté and Gilbert, 2009; Lemyre et al., 2007; Vinson et al., 2016; Cross and Lyle, 1999). More recently, collective thinking has codified definition into four discrete coaching dispositions – psychology, modelling, sociology and pedagogy – reported by multiple researchers including Bush (2013).

Psychological
This approach focuses on the coaches’ cognitive process, behaviours and decision-making, and their impact on their relationships with the athlete. Disparate qualitative methods are used to measure this approach, many based on subjective observational studies of elite coaches (Bloom et al., 1999) such as basketball coach, Jerry Tarkanian.

Research considers this theme a simple sub-category of sports psychology, meaning it is not so universally accepted in its own right (Smith and Small, 1993). The assertion that conventional psychological understanding applies, such as the impacts upon player self-esteem, (Smoll et al., 1993), is routinely cited to corroborate that belief.

Modelling
Having a defined model is a desirable facet of CP, coupled with sports’ national governing bodies (NGBs) and individual organisations to measure the quality of coaches, and define the CPs they espouse.
(Abraham et al., 2007). Early models (Fairs, 1987) proved too simplistic for what is a complex process and were superseded with more granular, though not yet mature, models (Jones and Wallace, 2005).

**Sociological**

Coaching should be considered a social activity (Wenger, 1998) because it consists of procedural actions delivered within a social framework (ibid.). Its manifestation in CP endorsed in newer research, including explaining successful coaching necessitates prominent social behaviours such as leadership, empathy, honesty, responsiveness, and an adaptable and caring nature of coaches (Jowett and Cockerill, 2003; Côté and Gilbert, 2009).

Myriad behaviours determine how the coach appropriates these social relationships - their commitment, conscientiousness, investment of elevated levels of time and energy, and felicitous ethical behaviour are significant examples (Bergmann Drewe, 2000a; Jones, 2006; Hardman et al., 2010).

**Pedagogical**

Some teaching-specific concepts (Bergmann Drewe, 2000b) have only recently been considered desirable for coaching, where customarily only the physical aspects had this association. However, more recent research (Jones, 2006) reinforces the understanding that coaching is also a cognitive practice, sharing attributes with teaching.

Traditional coach education, consisting of lecture style teaching and observation of expert coaches, is now routinely complemented with best practices developed in educational settings (Nelson and Cushion, 2007). Two attributes in particular, mentoring and reflective practice, are now considered essential for developing expert coaches.

**Synopsis**

Although ongoing research and improvements to CP are now prevalent, it remains complex, its components not yet universally agreed or understood. Convincing research and erosion of outdated views and practices will serve to promote greater understanding and its enhanced application.

**QUESTIONING AS A COACHING BEHAVIOUR**

**Background**

Observing behaviours is a well-established method of improving teaching performance and, more recently, coaching, with multiple systems used to interpret results, e.g. the CAIS system (Hughes and Franks, 2015; Brewer and Jones, 2002; Cushion et al., 2012). Using bespoke systems is promoted because common behaviour categorisation is both subjective, it is relatively immature, and intra-study clarification is required (Mayer, 2004; Kirschner et al., 2006).

Instruction, praise and silence are the historically the most common desirable behaviours (Vinson et al., 2016). In a 1996 study, it was found that questioning by ice hockey coaches was not recognised as an independent category – demonstrating the limited historical referencing and understanding for over 20 years. Questioning has only recently been notated individually and widely where previously it was prevalent only amongst the most highly successful elite coaches (Cope et al., 2015; Vinson et al., 2016; Claxton, 1988; Bloom, et al., 1999).

The Football Association developed its 21st Century flagship qualification, FA Youth Award (The Football Association, 2010),
incorporating questioning as one of six main topics, further suggesting its greater importance than before.

**Usefulness**
Questioning develops cognition when used as part of an overall athlete-centred approach to coaching, critical in ensuring ongoing athlete motivation, success, enjoyment, and participation (Cope et al., 2015). The practice also helps demonstrate the athlete is valued, and their needs are being addressed, particularly when their learning is prioritised over the coaches’ needs (Cope and Foster, 2017; Cushion et al., 2012).

Questioning is well established as a tool to develop athletes’ problem solving and decision-making skills (Hopper and Kruisselbank, 2001), its application, however, is less so. Affirmed in one study indicating only 3.22% of recorded behaviours amongst professional rugby coaches (Granger and Rhind, 2017), another demonstrated its low significance in elite performance settings (d’Arrippe-Longueville et al., 1998). A study into professional football coaches (Cope et al., 2016) surmised low capability in techniques, preference for immediate response, using leading questions to coerce desired responses and a teacher-pupil type relationship as likely reasons for exiguous use of high calibre questioning.

**Future use**
Several recent studies recognise shortcomings and potential causes of questioning; tone of voice, formation of questions, environmental circumstances, and nature of participants to name a few (Brownstein, 2001; Pearson and Webb, 2008; Erickson and Côté, 2015; Sports Coach UK, 2016; Cope et al., 2016).

The value of questioning is in accordance with both psychological theory and the objective measurement successful coaching, although its use not necessarily the panacea for inadequate coaching. Research indicates the willingness to adopt this paradigm, albeit with insufficient quality at present, but with effective training (Brownstein, 2001) and increased application (Hopper and Kruisselbank, 2001), it can certainly supplement a coach’s portfolio of skills (Hughes and Franks, 2015).

**MODELLING THE COACHING PROCESS**

**Background**
Conventional learning theory (Dewey, 1938) explains that observation and judgement are crucial to the learning process, encouraging incorporation of such thinking in standardised models. Initially, simplistic cyclical models were proposed, reactive in nature (Stratton et al., 2004) and of a three stage ‘experience-reflection-plan’ or four stage ‘experience-reflection-conclude-plan’ (Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1998).

Coaching theorists initially adopted rudimentary models (Fairs, 1987; Crisfield et al., 1996; Sherman et al., 1997), see Figures 1 and 2 below, though contemporary thinking did develop once scale, complexity and understanding of coaching began to mature (Cushion et al., 2006).

Figure 1. Simplistic 4 Stage Cyclical Coaching Model

Realisation that such simplistic thinking was not widely using or directly relevant to coaching (Cushion et al., 2003) led to new research (Groom et al., 2011) aimed at incorporating dynamic reticulation of psychological and social processes within models. It has gradually become clear that creating and implementing a settled process is desirable for effective coaching (Côté et al., 1995; Bloom and Salmela, 2000; Cushion et al., 2006), though not in isolation (Nelson et al., 2012).

Complexities
Leading research suggests that successfully creating an all-encompassing process is too complex, the underlying rationale pervasive (Cushion, 2010). Sophisticated social interactions (Jones and Wallace, 2005) and regular instantaneous in-session changes (Saury and Durand, 1998) explain real-time intricacies. Additionally, conflicting model definition at both session level and wider CP level (Cushion, et al., 2006), conflicting design for performance or participation settings (Lyle, 2002), ongoing coaching improvements (ibid.), and undefined structures (Wenger, 1998; Jones, 2006; Cushion et al., 2006) all compound complexity.

Early coaching models, pertinent to traditional coaching apprenticeships (i.e. rudimentary observation of experts) and extremely simplistic in nature, merely reproduced existing practices, good or bad. This helped perpetuate long-standing “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” allegories (Cassidy et al., 2009). The too-simplistic nature of these models, without sufficient detail or robust review, served to suppress any benefits of using such models.

Bourdieu (1977) proposed that, because coaching could be defined as “structured improvisation”, it is an art and not a defined science. Cushion et al. (2003) were then prompted to say that, since coaching practice consists of many elements, not all of which can be easily modelled, either individually or collectively, creating an all-encompassing model is impossible or near impossible to achieve.

Effective modelling
Coach education of the recent past has largely consisted of classroom-based learning plus teacher-pupil type practical observations (Jones, 2006). It is argued that ongoing, specific and targeted coaching model training (Côté et al., 1995) will improve coach education, as will broader use of the plan-do-review methodology (Côté and Gilbert, 2009; Hardman et al., 2010) - see Figure 3. Gaining that sound understanding (Cross and Lyle, 2008) will, in turn, improve coaching practice.

There is difficulty in identifying an all-encompassing coaching model (Poczwardowski et al., 2002; Lyle, 2007). Accordingly, to the development of models, bespoke to an individual sports organisation, its coaches and idiosyncrasies, appears propitious (Lemyre et al., 2007) - see Figure 3:
COACHING VS TEACHING PEDAGOGIES

Theory
Determining differences between coaching and teaching pedagogies is complicated. Even establishing if either or both demand a behaviourist or humanist approach for best practice is ambiguous, as are the attempts to define and differentiate the terms “educator”, “coach” and “teacher” (Bergmann Drewe, 2000b). Prior to becoming a successful, well researched elite basketball coach, John Wooden, was a well-renowned teacher (Côté and Gilbert, 2009). He described himself an educator (Wooden, 1997), but neither a coach nor a teacher.

Differences
A direct-instruction classified approach (Lodewyk, 2015), originating from behaviourist theory (Watson, 1913), is the most common delivery style of physical education teachers and coaches (Butler, 2005). The practice is characterised by inflexibly structured physical instruction, prioritisation of skill mastery and technical execution in isolation. This lack of engagement and purposeful interaction ultimately cultivates disaffected participants (Azzarito and Ennis, 2003), perhaps defining the different approaches of teachers and coaches (and physical education teachers).

The theories of Maslow and Rogers regarding humanistic ideals (Lombardo, 1978), such as holistic treatment and development of the athlete/student, were previously considered incongruous to sports coaching and performance (Lyle, 2002), though now feature highly in effective professional coaching. These traditional beliefs of the cognitive approach to coaching not delivering ‘serious training’ (Cassidy et al., 2009), had restricted wider accession of this thinking. Amineh and Davatgari Asl (2015) tell us that being leaders and facilitators is more likely to help athletes learn independently, challenging their own values, views and methods only recently thought to be essential for sporting performance (Williams, 2013).

It has been argued that, because of diverse environmental factors (location, desired outcomes, etc.) there is additional context surrounding coaching when compared to classroom teaching (Cassidy et al., 2009), effectively perpetuating or extending divergent descriptions. An example of how the contexts differ was depicted by Gallimore and Tharp (2004); they commented that Wooden’s precise preparation and extensive use of micro-level detailed plans differentiated his teaching from his coaching - devoting the same amounts of time to preparation and delivery is something impossible to achieve in teaching.

Similarities
A successful athlete-centred approach encompasses quality of practices (McCloskey, 1999), enhanced two-way athlete communication (Mahoe, 2007) and athlete motivation (Hansen et al., 2003)
alongside the long-established components of physical skills development and a strong knowledge of the sport (Schempp et al., 2006; Abraham et al., 2007). This athlete-centred approach enables acceptance of responsibility for self-learning and so the ability to build self-awareness, a better capacity for learning, ongoing participation and enjoyment (Kidman et al., 2010). Research has shown that a prerequisite for effective coaching is the ability to work with people (Bennie and Connor 2010) allied to a reduced emphasis on technical and tactical elements, further suggesting congruence.

Manifestation of ethical behaviours, including habitual principled virtues and taking responsibility for moral education (Hardman et al., 2010), the development of two-way trust and likeability - seen to help construct effective leaders - (Hardman et al., 2010) apply equally to coaching and teaching. There are other expedient areas where innate and desired traits are shared. For example, hard work, positive approach, not being over-paternalistic (Hardman et al., 2010) and the ongoing application of best practice are common across both. Additionally, frugal use of extrinsic rewards, which can suppress athletes/students becoming motivated by end rewards (Kidman and Hanrahan, 2011) and avoidance of sanctioned physical or impersonal punishment, (Kidman and Hanrahan, 2011), both desirable to prevent the perception of authoritarianism.

**Summary**
The pedagogies of teaching and coaching share many characteristics, e.g. it is accepted the cognitive approach is likely to generate more success in both fields compared to instruction style (Bruning et al., 2011). Providing nuanced differences are acknowledged, Wooden’s extensive pre-planning being a high-profile example, it could be suggested that the pedagogies of are so similar they are simply variations of each other.

**REFERENCES**


