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Blogs: A Tool to Facilitate Reflection and Community of Practice in Sports Coaching?

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Abstract

A reflective approach to practice is consistently espoused as a key tool for understanding and enhancing coach learning and raising the vocational standards of coaches. As such, there is a clear need for practical tools and processes that might facilitate the development and measurement of “appropriate” reflective skills. The aim of this preliminary study was to explore the use of online blogs as a tool to support reflection and community of practice in a cohort of undergraduate sports coaching students. Twenty-six students (6 females, 20 males) reflected on their coaching practice via blogs created specifically for reflection. Blogs were subjected to category and content analysis in order to identify the focus of entries and to determine both the emergent reflective quality of posts and the extent to which an online community of practice emerged. Findings revealed that descriptive reflection exceeded that of a critical nature, however, bloggers exhibited a positive trajectory toward higher order thinking and blogs were an effective platform for supporting tutor-student interaction. Despite the peer discourse features of blogs, collaborative reflection was conspicuous by its absence and an online community of practice did not emerge.

Keywords: coach learning; coach development; reflective practice; virtual; online

Blogs: A Tool to Facilitate Reflection and Community of Practice in Sports Coaching?

An increasing body of research is focused on gaining a better understanding of how coaches develop their craft and learn how to coach (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006). Typically, this research has questioned the value, impact, and effectiveness of formal coach education programmes (cf. Cushion et al., 2010). Instead, the majority of coach learning has been shown to occur experientially through a wide and varied range of informal and self-directed learning activities (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007). As a result, it has been argued that there is a need for innovative coach education approaches that can better equip coaches with the professional competencies needed to deal with the problematic and dynamic nature of their work (Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne, & Llewellyn, 2013). For example, the language and value of reflection have become increasingly prominent in academic (and professional) coach education programmes. Indeed, a reflective approach to practice is now espoused as a key tool for understanding and enhancing coach learning and raising the vocational standards of coaches (e.g., Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin, 2004; Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Neville, 2001; Lyle & Cushion, 2010).

Nevertheless, due to a perceived lack of criticality and an over reliance on superficial and descriptive activities which are, in actual fact, inherently non-reflective as well as susceptible to a range of social influences, numerous authors have drawn attention to the inadequacy of the strategies often labeled as reflective practice in the sports coaching domain (e.g., Cropley & Hanton, 2011). Although a number of authors offer structured guidance on the actual mechanics of reflection (e.g., Gibbs, 1988; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001) and even on how it may be taught (e.g., Gilbert & Trudel, 2006), it has been suggested that current reflective practice approaches often portray confusing agendas, with insufficient instructional guidance offered to coaches on “how” to engage in the process (Cropley, Miles, & Peel,

2012; Cushion et al., 2010) or indeed, on what aspects they should reflect (Abraham & Collins, 2011). As a result, Cropley and Hanton (2011) question whether the domain of sports coaching has simply “jumped on the bandwagon” of reflection, without properly considering and understanding the concept, and how it might be best implemented.

Within the literature, reflection is frequently depicted in a hierarchical representation of distinct levels or stages of reflection, ranging from shallow description at one end to critical reflection at the other (e.g., Day, 1993; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Sen & Ford, 2009). Crucially, it is the notion of critical reflection which is espoused as being the most empowering and transformational in nature, allowing individuals to become more responsible for their actions and providing a basis for practice that is ultimately emancipatory (Black & Plowright, 2010; Saylor, 1990; Sen & Ford, 2009; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Critical reflection involves “looking beneath the surface” of a situation in order to identify and critique any assumptions that are being made, as well as challenge the values and beliefs that are being drawn upon (Mezirow, 1990; Saylor, 1990). Indeed, Thompson and Thompson (2008) highlight the importance of such critical “depth” in effectual reflective practice. However, they also stress the need for critical “breadth”; that is, the adoption of a wider lens in order to raise awareness of, and reduce susceptibility to, what Billet and Somerville (2004) term the “social press.” Explicitly, this includes the historical, social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence and shape behavior (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2002). As such, critically reflective coaches should be able to apply reflective processes that go beyond the descriptive and harness the “why” and “what for” of coaching practice. For example, we would expect them to (a) provide a critique of an incident or issue, not merely a description of what happened (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998); (b) step back and adopt a questioning approach when evaluating their experiences in order to understand “why” they coach the way they do (Cushion et al., 2003); (c) clarify and understand personal coaching philosophies and

99 examine the underlying values and beliefs that shape their thinking and coaching practice
100 (Jones et al., 2002); and (d) maintain an open mind and critically examine the values
101 espoused by the social “milieu” and cultural context of their coaching practice (Stoszkowski
102 & Collins, 2012).

103 Nevertheless, in order to become critically reflective practitioners, coaches first need
104 to “learn” the complex skill of reflection, which Knowles et al. (2001) caution “is not a
105 simplistic process even with structured support” (p. 204). As such, there is a clear need for
106 practical tools and processes that might facilitate the development and measurement of
107 “appropriate” reflective skills. Accordingly, it is to one such potential tool that the focus of
108 this paper now turns.

109 Traditionally, the most consistently heralded technique for promoting reflective
110 practice in a variety of disciplines, including coaching, is structured written reflection, most
111 commonly in the form of a reflective journal (Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Anderson, 2007;
112 Knowles et al., 2001; Moon, 2006). More recently however, a new wave of Web 2.0
113 technologies have emerged which provide alternatives to reflective journals and are said to
114 have the potential to further strengthen and promote critical thinking and reflection in a range
115 of learning environments (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). Web logs (known as blogs), are a
116 social media platform that have been employed as a mechanism for increasing reflective
117 capacity and facilitating deeper learning across a range of educational settings, including
118 higher education (Churchill, 2009), teacher training (Stiler & Philleo, 2003), internships
119 (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012), and medical education (Whitcomb, 2003). In its simplest form,
120 a blog is an easily created website that resembles an online journal and allows an individual
121 to frequently record and publish their personal thoughts, viewpoints, and reflections on the
122 Internet (Downes, 2004; Sharma & Xie, 2008). Posts are made using a web browser and are
123 subsequently archived, organized, and displayed in reverse chronological order, allowing

users to refer back to earlier entries. In addition to straight text and hyperlinks, blogs can also incorporate other forms of media, such as images, audio, and video (Duffy & Bruns, 2006). As a result, a blog is said to be learner centered and full of authenticity, liveliness, and accountability (Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011). It has also been reported that blogs require no additional technical knowledge than that needed for basic word processing (Cold, 2006), that they are motivating learning activities in themselves (Pinkman, 2005), and that they promote greater ownership of content than paper-based journals (Downes, 2004; Godwin-Jones, 2003).

Furthermore, and perhaps more interestingly, one notable promise of “blogging” is that it promotes multi-layered social interaction and interpersonal communication by enabling readers to comment on blog entries. That is, readers can provide feedback on the ideas presented, as well as “prompt” further reflection and thought regarding a stated viewpoint or opinion (Duffy & Bruns, 2006; Top, Yukselturk, & Inan, 2010). Similarly, a number of authors have suggested that blogs provide the perfect platform for collaborative learning and reflective conversation (Freeman & Brett, 2012; Garrison & Akyol, 2009; Godwin-Jones, 2003). That is, students build knowledge together as they are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own (Dooly, 2008). Consequently, blogs are said to have the capacity to develop into effective online or “virtual” communities of practice (Hall, 2008; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) defined “communities of practice” as a group of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p.4). In a CoP, each member is said to actively engage with other members of the community (mutual engagement), actively share information and assist each other to pursue the jointly agreed goal (joint enterprise), and share the routines, gestures,

words and actions that are common to the CoP (shared repertoire) (Galipeau & Trudel, 2006; Wenger, 1988).

Moreover, shifting reflective journaling to an online medium such as a blog is said to allow for “students” to have richer and more meaningful interaction with their tutors (Wolf, 2010). Tutors can observe and identify students’ learning experiences, struggles, and discomforts in order to make necessary accommodations during instructional activities (Yang, 2009). Alongside this, they can assess the validity of the knowledge being generated during the reflective process. Comments on blog posts can then be used to provide frequent support in developing reflective skills as part of a formative process by accessing the blog entries and sharing their expertise with the individual (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). Crucially, blogs could therefore act as a platform to help coach educators direct and support experiential learning (Culver & Trudel, 2006) and provide coaches with the structures, issues, knowledge, and information they should reflect against, in order for their reflection to be sufficiently critical. As such, the tutor’s availability as an experienced dialogical other with which to “do” reflection (Cushion, 2006) echoes Vygotsky’s (1978) contention that an individual’s learning may be enhanced through engagement with a more capable other. Indeed, several authors have concluded that the ongoing support and leadership of a dedicated facilitator (i.e., tutor) is crucial if communities of practice are to work in sports coaching (e.g., Culver & Trudel, 2006; Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009).

Despite a variety of authors advocating the use of blogging to promote reflective practice (e.g., Bruster & Petersen, 2013; Downes, 2004; Yang, 2009), the research available on the use of blogs in different educational activities remains relatively limited (Sharma & Xie, 2008). Furthermore, there remains a paucity of empirical research investigating their application in the field of sports coaching. Indeed, at the time of writing, no published studies have been undertaken which investigate the reflective affordances of blogs for coach

development. It must also be noted that results in other fields often remain informal, unsystematic, and inconclusive (Kim, 2008; Sharma & Xie, 2008). In addition, the general assumption that blogs can facilitate peer and group interaction, and, therefore, encourage the social construction of knowledge, are yet to be supported by empirical findings (Halic, Lee, Paulus, & Spence, 2010). Instead, it seems that the supposed technical advantages and educational application of blogs have preceded evidence of their effectiveness (Halic et al., 2010; Tan, 2006).

Therefore, the primary purpose of this preliminary investigation was to answer the research question “Can blogs facilitate reflection and community of practice among a module cohort of sports coaching students?” In order to determine if participants could critically reflect on their coaching practice and participate in a community of practice (through the auspices of online blogs created specifically for reflection), three specific research questions served as guides in the data analysis:

1. What types of reflection were involved in students’ blog posts, that is, were they descriptive or critical?
2. To what extent did blogs facilitate social interaction and the development of a community of practice?
3. What was the module tutor’s role in the process of blogging?

Method

Participants

The sample in the present study consisted of 26 full-time undergraduate students (6 females and 20 males), who made up a module cohort on a Sports Coaching degree program during the 2012/13 academic cycle. The average age of the participants was 20.04 years ($SD = 1.34$) and the median coaching experience was reported as 2 years, with experience ranging from 1 to 5 years in a range of sports (See Table 1). All participants were concurrently

coaching in the community (i.e., over and above any practical coaching associated with their course of study) for a minimum of two hours per week and had completed at least one national governing body coaching award, with the highest awarded qualification translating to level two of the UK coaching certificate endorsed framework (Sports Coach UK, 2012a). Two participants had previous experiences with blogging.

Procedure

The module in question was titled “The Reflective Coach” and was a compulsory component of the second academic year of the degree program. At the same time, students were undertaking five other modules, two of which were compulsory and specifically related to the pedagogy of coaching and professional practice. Their remaining three modules were option choices selected from a suite including sports science and the “ologies” of coaching (e.g., sport psychology etc.), and the development and sociology of sport (e.g., community sport development, talent development pathways etc.). An introductory lecture highlighted the module’s aims, learning outcomes, and assessment procedures. Students were advised that the upkeep of an ongoing reflective blog was a necessary element of assessment (worth 60% of final module grade) and were instructed to set up their own blog using the externally hosted blog service of either <https://wordpress.com> or <https://blogger.com>. It was explained that they could customize the web address of their blog, select a design template, and make other layout customizations; as such, it was made clear that the ownership of the blogs lay with the user (Tan, 2006). The second week’s session was split into two. The first half explored the conceptual and practical issues associated with reflective practice. Here, Gilbert and Trudel’s (2001) structured model of experiential learning, which has gained credence in the extant literature (Cushion et al., 2010), was presented as an exemplar framework to guide the reflective process. The second half then focused on reflective blogging; its purpose, process, and pedagogical value. At the end of the session, students were given a reading list

of academic literature pertaining to reflective practice and instructed to make the first post on their blog. The third week was then given over to the logistical procedures of the blogging assessment. The module tutor explained that there was no length or subject requirement for posts, but students were asked to reflect on personally significant events or “critical incidents” (Cropley & Hanton, 2011; Holt & Streat, 2001) during their coaching/learning (both inside and outside of university). It was explained that unlike most academic writing, which is commonly in the third person, the use of first person was encouraged in order to promote ownership and personalization of the entries (Moon, 2006). Based on the assessment marking criteria, students were advised of the requirement to contribute to their blogs regularly for the remainder of the academic year (26 weeks). This was stipulated as a minimum of 15 separate posts made in different weeks. Other criteria included the quality of written expression, level of reflection, analysis of material in relation to appropriate theoretical concepts/models, and citations/links to additional relevant material (i.e., appropriate academic literature). Finally, in order to encourage the emergence of a community of reflective practice, students were asked to read and provide constructive feedback on their peers’ blogs for the remainder of the module by clicking on the “reply” or “comment” link on selected entries. As such, students were asked to maintain privacy settings that would allow their blog to be openly viewed by their peers. In addition, it was explained that the module tutor would monitor blog posts and provide regular feedback via the same process.

Timetabled sessions for the remainder of the module (2 hours per week) primarily involved student-led practical workshops designed to explore pedagogical theories and concepts relating to coaching practice. Additional tutor support and feedback on blog entries was also provided during one-to-one tutorials each semester, as well as during casual discussions within timetabled sessions. The tutor recorded thoughts emerging from these

feedback processes and other observations of blogging activity in field notes for the full duration of the module.

Data Analysis

A category analysis of all students' blog posts was conducted in order to identify the focus of the entries they had made and determine the reflective quality of the writing exhibited. First, each post was read multiple times and coded according to categories based on Yang's (2009) framework for qualitative research on reflective blogs. As Yang's (2009) framework focused on trainee teachers' reflections on the teaching process, it was modified to fit the aims of the present study, which resulted in the following categories and subcategories:

1. Theories of coaching. Postings by the students about the pedagogical theories relating to coaching practice taught on the course.
2. Own coaching practice. Postings by the students referring to their own coaching practice and the approaches and methods employed, as well as their expression of beliefs and knowledge related to these practices.
3. Others' coaching practice. Postings relating to the coaching practice of others and the approaches and methods utilised, as well as their expression of beliefs and knowledge related to these practices.
4. Self-awareness. Postings based on self-consciousness and self-evaluation of own skills and knowledge.
5. Blogging. Postings about; (a) the use of the blog, and (b) interacting with others online.

During this analysis, a single blog post could fit into more than one category. On the two occasions where the authors, both of whom were experienced researchers in qualitative methods, disagreed about the categories in which a post was placed, negotiation was pursued

until a consensus of opinion was reached on their accuracy and clarity. Following the recommendations of Krane, Andersen, and Streat (1997), a reliability check was also conducted by asking an independent investigator, trained in qualitative methodology but blind to the objectives of the study, to audit the assigned categories to ensure that they accurately reflected blog entries. No errors were found.

Then, all entries were reread and coded in line with Hatton and Smith's (1995) reflective writing framework, which has been used previously to identify levels of reflection in student writing (Boud & Walker, 1998; Moon, 2006; Whipp, 2003). Hatton and Smith (1995) based this framework on an extensive literature review and refined the categories and definitions it employs over several trials (Rourke & Anderson, 2004). They identify four types of writing: unreflective descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection. To support reliability when coding, Hatton and Smith (1995) provide detailed guidance for using the framework, including specific examples for each of the four categories (Poom-Valickis & Mathews, 2013). They also advise that within a single unit of writing (i.e., a blog post) students may employ a lower level of reflection in order to then progress to a higher level of reflective writing. As a result, each blog post was coded according to the highest level of reflection reached within that entry (Freeman & Brett, 2012). Again, on the very few occasions (three) where minor coding discrepancies emerged between the two authors, negotiation was pursued until a consensus of opinion was reached.

Finally, content analysis was used to examine each blog in terms of the number of entries, the frequency of posts, the number of posts incorporating citations to other relevant material, and the word count of each entry. Following the research methodology of Kol and Scholnik (2008), each blog was also examined using a web-based text analysis tool (<http://textalyser.net/>) in order to identify possible differences in lexical density (i.e., the complexity of posts) between semester one and two. This analysis was also applied in order

to identify changes in the range of vocabulary used in blogs (i.e., the number of different words).

Results

A total of 448 blog entries were analysed (217 in semester one, 231 in semester two), including 433 written posts and 15 containing speech based audio which were transcribed verbatim and coded. The total number of blog entries made by each student ranged from 10 to 31 ($M = 17.23$, $SD = 4.51$), with written posts ranging from a minimum of 81 to a maximum of 2481 words in length ($M = 518.35$, $Mdn = 428$, $SD = 323.65$), and audio posts ranging from a minimum of 46 seconds to a maximum of 204 seconds ($M = 100.87$, $Mdn = 76$, $SD = 54.01$). The focus of students' blog posts varied. Table 2 shows that students' own coaching practice was the most frequent topic, followed by self-awareness of their own skills and knowledge, and posts relating to the theories of coaching taught on the course. The least frequent topic was the process of blogging itself. The findings of the present study are now arranged by the three research questions presented earlier in this paper.

What types of reflection were involved in students' blog posts?

As Table 3 shows, 11.16% of blog posts were coded as unreflective descriptive writing according to Hatton and Smith's (1995) criteria. In these cases, the students simply described what had happened and how they had responded to an incident or situation. Beyond this, there was no discussion or analysis of the issue. For example, "The majority of the children engaged very well...However, there were one or two children in my group who just weren't interested in taking part and despite my best efforts, I couldn't get one of the children to take part." With regard to more "productive" posts, the largest proportion of coded units (56.47%) constituted descriptive reflection. These posts also involved students providing an outline of what had happened and how they had responded to a situation or incident from their own perspective. Notably however, they also evidenced attempts to give

reasons or provide justifications for events or actions. Nevertheless, this was again reported or described in an uncritical way, as stated in Hatton and Smith's (1995) criteria. For example, "The tone of my voice at times can be too low and I can at times speak too quickly when nervous. This is most common when I work alone as I can become nervous if I feel pressured."

The second largest proportion of students' blog posts (29.91%) were coded as dialogic reflection. As defined, this type of reflection is more analytical, and involves stepping back from, mulling over, or tentatively exploring reasons for events, for example:

It's really weird how much more confident I feel around this group than the coaching group at Uni. I think it could be because I'm not afraid to do something wrong whereas in class I'm afraid of doing something wrong and looking stupid.

In addition to description and analysis of the problem, the blog posts classified as dialogic reflection also evidenced attempts to report an understanding of the wider context and see things from alternative points of view, for example:

Why doesn't this type of session happen more often in schools? They learn transferable skills, which you can see improving in front of you as they get more tries at their game...I taught football in their school last year and I never saw the kids be as involved, keen or inventive as I saw them today.

Crucially, only 2.45% of blog posts corresponded to Hatton and Smith's (1995) criteria for critical reflection. As defined, this type of reflection demonstrates an awareness that actions and events are not only explicable by multiple perspectives, but are also located in and influenced by multiple historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts. For example, "As a developing coach, and having had experience of teaching within a secondary school, inclusion is a major aspect of the delivery process that is being pressed." Or, for example, "Sometimes I think that coaches can become entangled in the success and publicity side of

competition. We rarely challenge the purpose of the competition or the impact it has on children's development..."

Table 1 shows that 12 students posted on their blog 15 times (or less) during the year, the basic requirement for the module, suggesting minimal engagements in the process. Of those 12 participants, only six increased their number of posts between semester one and semester two, and 10 increased the quality of their reflection (see Table 1). Of the 14 other participants, six increased their number of posts and 13 increased the quality of their reflection. In sum, only twelve of the 26 participants increased their number of posts, but 23 demonstrated evidence of the development of a more reflective style and a clear difference in the reflective quality of their entries between the two semesters. Indeed, Table 3 shows that the number of posts coded as dialogic and critical reflection rose in semester two when compared to semester one. At the same time, the number of posts coded as descriptive writing and descriptive reflection fell during the same period. Similarly, during semester two, only one participant did not have dialogic or critical reflections, compared to 11 participants in semester one (see Table 1). Nevertheless, it seems that reaching the dialogic and critical reflection levels was difficult for many of the participants since half of them had, after two semesters, three or less of their posts at the level of dialogical or critical reflection. Interestingly, of the very few posts that were made using uploaded audio, 12 of the 15 were coded as dialogic reflection and the remaining three as descriptive reflection.

Positively, the number of blog posts that integrated citations to appropriate theoretical concepts and academic literature within the discussion rose from an average of 3.88 per student blog in semester one to 5.08 per blog in semester two. Similarly, Table 2 shows that the number of blog posts that focused (at least partly) on the theories of coaching covered in class increased between the two semesters. This suggests that some students began to make more consistent links between theory and coaching practice, which would be expected with

the development of less descriptive reflection. This was coupled with a rise in the average length of posts from 498 words in semester one, to 536 words in semester two, and a rise in the average number of different words used in student blogs from an average of 891 different words used in semester one to 1022 different words used in semester two. This is considered an indication of development in the expression and elaboration of thoughts between the two semesters. In addition, 19 out of the 26 students showed a reduction in the lexical density of posts made in semester two when compared to semester one. This suggests that blog entries became less complex and more easily understood as students used terminology surrounding core concepts more consistently.

To what extent did blogs facilitate social interaction and the development of a community of practice?

At the start of the module, three students stated their reluctance to make their blog posts accessible for peer viewing and did not configure their privacy settings to permit this until half way through semester one. Of the 26 students that maintained blogs during the module, none provided direct feedback by leaving comments on the blog posts of their peers. Similarly, none of the 448 entries made were aimed directly at the blogging environment and creating a sense of community. Despite this, it was clear when surveying the students' blogs that they were making a conscious effort to read their peer's blogs. For example, this was evidenced in comments such as "One blog I looked at showed particular success from the blog style of reflection, this blog talks about their resistance to begin blogging but once the routine of posting was established they found it a useful tool for reflection." And, for example, "Reading through peoples' blogs; it's clear that confidence, or lack of, is one of the key concerns that a lot of people are focusing on improving throughout the year."

Similarly, several students made regular reference to their peer's blogs within their own blog posts, indeed, often including direct links and "reflecting" on what they had read.

398 For example, one student remarked "...after reading X's thoughts on this session
399 (click here to view his post) it's interesting to see that he noticed our position when giving
400 instructions to the kids, this is something I was not aware of..." Whilst another commented:
401 I don't agree with X's further comments about me being the favored coach...He says
402 it's because I get across information in a sneaky way. By this I think he means that I
403 probe and probe until they really show an understanding.

404 **What was the module tutor's role in the process of blogging?**

405 Getting five students "signed up" with their personal blog account took more time
406 than anticipated and the module tutor spent several weeks prompting these students to do this
407 through direct emails. The tutor read all student blogs and provided feedback,
408 encouragement, and questioning to students via the "comment" function on each entry. For
409 example, "Well done, X. There is more depth coming through in this post...you are starting
410 to get down into the 'why' and 'how' which is good." And, for example, "Very insightful
411 post, Y. It would have been good to see a little more literature on reflective practice to help
412 back up these points but you make links with your own practice well." In many cases, the
413 tutor's feedback stimulated additional reflection, evidenced in subsequent "reply" comments
414 by the student, for example:

415 Thanks for the comment! I do have a tendency of being too descriptive...I have been
416 trying to add more analytical thinking. I really appreciate your help as this is
417 something I struggle with, is there anywhere you would suggest I could go to develop
418 this?

419 In addition, the feedback left by the module tutor would often prompt informal discussion
420 with the student during timetabled sessions and tutorials. On these occasions, students would
421 often ask for clarification on the comments made, or reaction to the subsequent posts made
422 after tutor feedback. In addition, the tutor would, at times, attempt to encourage students to

read the posts of others in order to stimulate further reflection. For example, "...this post (hyperlink inserted) on a similar theme might stimulate some thought, do you agree with the author?"

On each blog, the posts were dated and timed for the entry or upload of material. If a student had not posted to their blog for more than three weeks (13 instances), the module tutor would highlight this via comments on the blog, prompts "in person" and direct email. As a result, some students would "bulk" upload the equivalent of several weeks of entries at one time. When enquiring as to the reason for this, the tutor was often told that students preferred to construct posts in a word processed document in order to later "cut and paste" onto their blog, as opposed to composing posts directly on the blog itself.

Discussion

The findings of the present study are now discussed in line with the three research questions presented earlier in this paper.

What types of reflection were involved in students' blog posts?

Consistent with the findings of other studies on the use of blogs for reflection (e.g., Lucas & Fleming, 2012; Parkes & Kajder, 2010; Yang, 2009), results highlighted that both descriptive and critical reflection was evidenced in students' blogs, with the number of descriptive reflections far exceeding those of a critical nature. Encouragingly, the majority of students exhibited a positive trajectory toward higher order thinking, giving weight to the suggestion that blogs might be a useful tool to foster the development of reflection in sports coaching. However, in line with other attempts to formally integrate coach reflection into university based coach education courses (e.g., Jones & Turner, 2006; Knowles, Tyler, Gilbourne, & Eubank, 2006), some students struggled to adopt a reflective practice orientation. That is, they did not move beyond sporadic use of their blog and reach the dialogic and critical reflection levels on a regular basis (see Table 1). As such, it is clear that

the mere provision of a reflective tool is no guarantee that those using it will automatically reflect at higher levels (Hatton & Smith, 1995). The results also lend weight to earlier contentions that critical reflection is a skill that should be taught rather than assumed (Gilbert & Trudel, 2006).

It has been suggested that coaches find it difficult to engage in effective reflection unless they have the underpinning theoretical knowledge the reflective process requires (Peel, Cropley, Hanton, & Fleming, 2013). As such, we recognize that whilst the participants in the present study were given instructional guidance on how to reflect on their coaching practice using blogs, with Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) structured model of experiential learning presented as a potential framework to guide the reflective process, this could have been insufficient to allow them to develop their understanding of the purposes and process of reflective practice. That is, although the introductory lectures in the present study provided participants with a structure to guide the mechanics of reflection, the actual reflective process of issue setting, unpacking, and solving was not operationalized fully (Abraham & Collins, 2011). For example, participants were not encouraged to critically examine and analyze their role frames in order to identify and/or reduce potential biases that might otherwise have guided or influenced their behavior (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Equally, whilst having sports coaches reflect on their day-to-day learning experiences in their own coaching context is important (Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009), we recognize that by specifically asking participants in the present study to focus on "critical incidents" during their experiential learning, they may have been overly concerned with identifying or focusing on negative aspects, or perceived "problems" within their coaching practice (Dixon, Lee, & Ghaye, 2013). In this regard, Smith and Jack (2005) suggest that individuals may "search" for problems on uneventful days in order to tick the assessment box, whilst Dixon et al. (2013)

propose that coaches might neglect to focus on their strengths and “how” they do what they already do well.

Clearly then, if we are to utilize blogs to facilitate reflection in coach education, we may first need to put more explicit processes and strategies in place to both encourage participation and guide coaches toward higher levels of reflection (Peel et al., 2013). Indeed, the absence of sufficient structures to support reflective practice has been cited as an inhibitor of enhanced reflection in previous research (Larrivee, 2008; Otienoh, 2009), with Knowles, Borrie, and Telfer (2005) finding that none of the coach education programmes they examined contained processes to overtly nurture reflective skills. Accordingly, Gilbert and Trudel (2013) suggest that support devices such as reflection cards and critical reflection exercises might help coaches to reflect more critically on their learning. Similarly, it has been suggested that detailed rubrics or matrixes of descriptors characterizing reflections might promote the development of critical reflection (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005; Larrivee, 2008), whilst structured blogging “tasks” (e.g., instructor prescribed topics), have been said to lead to more focused and specific blogging without detracting from the personalized nature of content (Robertson, 2011). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the development of reflective capacity is a complex process requiring time, effort and practice in order for it to be “learned” (Gelter, 2003; Knowles et al., 2001). Consequently, it must be noted that although the present study required participants to reflect using their blog for a period of 26 weeks, this timeframe might still be insufficient to engender familiarity with, and commitment to, the medium of blogging and the development of critically reflective skills (Cropley et al., 2012).

To what extent did blogs facilitate social interaction and the development of a community of practice?

The “social” influence of the blogging process was another factor which may require explicit development. Despite several researchers (e.g., Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Hall, 2008; Hara & Hew, 2007; Yang, 2009) reporting that blogs have the capacity to promote social interaction and the development of virtual learning communities, and a significant body of research suggesting that coaches learn through their social interactions with others (e.g., Culver & Trudel, 2006; Erickson, Bruner, Macdonald, & Côté, 2008), the present study found that participants did not take advantage of the collaborative and peer discourse features of blogs. Although students had direct access to peers’ blogs (Wenger, 1998), and it was apparent that many of them made the effort to regularly read their peers’ blog posts, overt dialogue and “reflective conversation” (Cropley et al., 2012) in the form of comments was conspicuous in its absence. As such, it is clear that a community of practice was not an automatic consequence of the availability of a collaborative tool in the present study (Chan & Ridgway, 2006). This finding echoes the assertions of other researchers who have reported that participants can often find it difficult to “make the step” toward a stronger sense of community in an online environment (e.g., Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Similarly, more dedicated “offline” studies have struggled to get coaches to interact with their peers and engage in the joint enterprise that characterizes a functioning CoP (Culver & Trudel, 2006, Culver et al., 2009; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004). For example, Gilbert and Trudel (2005) suggest that, whilst having access to peer sounding boards is vital, the mere availability of peers is not enough. Furthermore, those peers must also be respected and trusted for their knowledge of coaching before coaches will seek their counsel. Crucially however, Mallett, Rossi, and Tinning (2007) propose that the mutual trust and respect required to encourage social interaction between coaches can take many years to develop, something that the participants in the present study had not had. In addition, Lemyre et al. (2007) propose that facilitative peer interaction between coaches is never inevitable, as the “tradition” in coaching is not for

coaches to share knowledge, but to conceal ideas in order to gain a competitive advantage. In short, both this literature and our findings question the view of communities of practice as a panacea in the coach development process, as apparent in the relative uncritical initiation and rapid promotion of such groups, without the clearly essential carefully staged evolution.

Importantly however, Romiszowski and Mason (2004) argue that a seldom-challenged assumption exists in online learning research whereby a lack of overt dialogue is perceived as learners being “passive recipients” as opposed to actively engaged in learning with others. In fact, Wenger (1998) suggests that the social construction of meaning does not always require others to be “present.” It could be argued, therefore, that the participants in the present study were still capable of learning more from “lurking” (cf. Wright et al., 2007) and “just” reading the reflections posted by their peers than if they had simply recorded their own personal reflections (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). This is perhaps similar to the assertions of a range of authors, who suggest that apprentice coaches spend time simply observing other coaches as they become socialized into a subculture and learn how things should be done (Lemyre et al., 2007; Nash & Sproule, 2009; Stephenson & Jowett, 2009). Crucially then, we must acknowledge that the extent of the social interaction between the participants in the present study may have been assessed by potentially insufficient or overly simplistic quantitative measures, that is, the number of comments students made on peers’ blogs (Hrastinski, 2009).

Nevertheless, to facilitate and encourage interaction between students and the purposeful discourse characteristic of collaborative learning and the co-construction of knowledge (Chan & Ridgeway, 2006; Garrison & Akyol, 2009), more specific guidance on both the process and value of peer-to-peer learning may have been needed. For example, Gilbert et al. (2009) suggest that a written protocol describing how coaches should operate in peer learning settings would increase the accountability of coaches in such a learning

environment. Crucially, it must also be noted that previous studies that report significant levels of peer interaction and discussion on blogs required learners to complete directed tasks (e.g., Yang, 2009). Additionally, we recognize that the reflective affordances of the individual blogs operationalized in the present study might be insufficient for promoting the social discourse necessary for collaborative reflection. For example, group blogging, whereby a single blog functions as a collective platform for a “small” group of people to contribute and simultaneously share learning experiences, is said to support the emergence of interactive online communities and collaborative reflection (e.g., Makri & Kynigos, 2007). This communal deliberation is subsequently said to encourage each individual group member to become more critically reflective (Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2005). Consequently, group based blogging might align more closely with social constructivist perspectives on learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998), which many authors draw upon to stress the importance of dialogue with others in providing a “place” for the development of reflective practice and learning (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Reingold, Rimor, & Kalay, 2008). As such, the adoption of reflective group blogs as a more overt means of establishing online communities of practice is an interesting area for further investigation within sports coaching.

What was the module tutor’s role in the process of blogging?

Attempts to systematically integrate reflection into coach education programmes have primarily focused on reflection that is socially supported and/or mediated (Gallimore, Gilbert, & Nater, 2013), with a trained “facilitator” who leads and supports the process said to be key (Cassidy, Potrac, & McKenzie, 2006; Lyle, 2002). Collectively, the results in the present study indicate that blogs were an effective platform for the module tutor to instigate and facilitate meaningful dialogue with students in order to support their experiential learning and guide the reflective process where necessary (Culver & Trudel, 2006). Crucially however, this was only the case with those students who fully engaged in and committed to the

blogging process; a factor which must be considered and catered for both in future studies and practical applications.

Such issues notwithstanding, the tutor was able to offer guidance on what elements of a coaching issue need to be attended to, suggest what additional knowledge might be required, and propose strategies that the coach might use to address the issue (Abraham & Collins, 2011). Significantly, existing research has emphasized the importance of this type of intervention if reflection is to move beyond the basic level of description (Churchill, 2009). For example, significant empirical support has emerged for the scaffolding of reflection through appropriate questioning from a mentor or more capable other (e.g., Reingold et al., 2008; Vygotsky, 1978; Whipp, 2003).

However, in retrospect, the tutor recognized that his questioning comments could have been in and of themselves more critical in order to draw out and encourage higher levels of reflective thinking in the students. For example, when commenting on blog posts, the tutor tended to encourage students to become more aware of their behaviors and develop a rationale for their behavior by utilizing “why?” and “what if?” questions (Cushion et al., 2003; Lyle, 2002). Yet, he rarely prompted students to be more aware of their role frames (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004) and the values and beliefs that might underpin their behavior in a particular situation (Jones et al., 2002). Moreover, little reference was made to the social and cultural context of students’ practice, all factors inherent within critical reflection. This is particularly important, if, for example, we consider the social environment in which a coach works. This environment is extremely complex, and coaches are faced with a diverse range of influences, which pressure them to behave in certain ways in order to conform and secure approval (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Collins, Abraham, & Collins, 2012; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2012). Consequently, the subtleties of this environment can promote and perpetuate the value and acceptance of certain types of knowledge and behaviour over others (Cushion et

al., 2003) and guide what coaches choose to pay attention to as well as what they choose to learn (Werthner & Trudel, 2006). However, when considering the relative inexperience of some participants, the module tutor felt this level of questioning was perhaps beyond their current level of understanding. Indeed, several authors attribute the superficial nature of novice practitioners' reflections to less developed schema and a lack of appropriate theoretical knowledge due to insufficient experience (Moon, 2006; Tan, 2006). This raises the question of when is the appropriate time for this to occur and whether the journey toward critically reflective practice is a linear journey through the distinct and progressive stages of reflection.

Conclusion

Generally, results indicate that blogs hold the potential to facilitate reflection in coaches; however, in the present study they did not facilitate overt collaborative learning and the emergence of a community of practice. Nevertheless, we believe enough promise exists to warrant further investigation of their potential in coach education pedagogy (Morgan et al., 2013), particularly in utilizing group blogs to provide coaches with the opportunity to enhance critical thinking skills by engaging in peer dialogue and collaborative reflection (Culver & Trudel, 2006; Dixon et al., 2013; Manouchehri, 2002). Promisingly, given that a recent four-year coach tracking study found that the cost, timing, and travel involved in accessing coach education are major barriers to uptake (Sports Coach UK, 2012b), it seems Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs could allow coach educators to provide ongoing support to those coaches undertaking certification courses at relatively little monetary and "time" expense to both parties when compared to face-to-face solutions (Piggott, 2013).

As with prior research into the use of blogs in learning however, several methodological issues remain and we recognize the limits of what can be accomplished by a relatively small scale and short-term study of this nature. For example, as the current study

utilized a sample of undergraduate students in order to increase the level of “experimental control” over the process, as well as the homogeneity of participants, some readers may be concerned that participants lacked autonomy during the reflective process and that, as a result, engagement in the blogging process was mixed. We suggest the engagement levels in the present study were less a case of perceived student autonomy and more a case of some being more committed to learning than others, however, the findings clearly need extension and, if results so indicate, confirmation into “mainstream” coaching. Indeed, Gallimore et al. (2013) make clear there is a need to determine whether guided reflection initiatives can endure beyond concept studies into wide scale implementation in sports coaching. Similarly, there is a need to test whether the reflective skills evidenced during the blogging process endure outside the constraints of a structured and assessed module (Knowles et al., 2006). Indeed, Hobbs (2007) even questions whether or not reflective practice can, in fact, be a required component of a course and still retain validity as genuine reflection. Additionally, there is also a need for better insight into coaches’ perception and satisfaction relating to blog use for reflection and social interaction (Kim, 2008). We intend to pursue these lines in both educational and “normal” coach development environments.

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Table 1

Number and Quality of Blog Posts According to Hatton and Smith's (1995) Framework

Coach	Sport	Semester 1		Semester 2		Total (S1 + S2)		Increase number of posts (Total S2 - S1)	Increase quality of reflection (% S2 - S1)
		DiaR + CriR / Total		DiaR + CriR / Total		DiaR + CriR / Total			
1	Soccer	6/13	46%	4/5	80%	10/18	56%	No	Yes
2	Soccer	1/7	14%	4/10	40%	5/17	29%	Yes	Yes
3	Soccer	0/6	0%	2/13	15%	2/19	11%	Yes	Yes
4	Cricket	1/17	6%	4/14	29%	5/31	16%	No	Yes
5	Multisport	0/6	0%	1/9	11%	1/15	7%	Yes	Yes
6	Multisport	4/9	44%	6/8	75%	10/17	59%	No	Yes
7	Multisport	2/7	29%	6/10	60%	8/17	47%	Yes	Yes
8	Multisport	0/9	0%	4/6	67%	4/15	27%	No	Yes
9	Tennis	3/6	50%	9/14	64%	12/20	60%	Yes	Yes
10	Soccer	0/7	0%	1/6	17%	1/13	8%	No	Yes
11	Gymnastics	0/9	0%	2/8	25%	2/17	12%	No	Yes
12	Cricket	1/7	14%	6/8	75%	7/15	47%	Yes	Yes
13	Tennis	4/10	40%	10/11	91%	14/21	67%	Yes	Yes
14	Soccer	3/8	38%	5/8	63%	8/16	50%	No	Yes

15	Cricket	2/8	25%	1/7	14%	3/15	20%	No	No
16	Soccer	5/10	50%	6/7	86%	11/17	65%	No	Yes
17	Soccer	0/5	0%	1/10	10%	1/15	7%	Yes	Yes
18	Soccer	1/7	14%	2/8	25%	3/15	20%	Yes	Yes
19	Soccer	0/7	0%	2/8	25%	2/15	13%	Yes	Yes
20	Soccer	0/6	0%	1/8	13%	1/14	7%	Yes	Yes
21	Soccer	1/7	14%	0/7	0%	1/14	7%	No	No
22	Soccer	1/7	14%	4/7	57%	5/14	36%	No	Yes
23	Basketball	15/16	94%	9/10	90%	24/26	92%	No	No
24	Soccer	0/6	0%	1/4	25%	1/10	10%	No	Yes
25	Field hockey	0/5	0%	2/11	18%	2/16	13%	Yes	Yes
26	Field hockey	0/13	0%	2/13	15%	2/26	8%	No	Yes
TOTAL		50/218	23%	95/230	41%	145/448	32%	No	Yes

Note. DiaR = Dialogic reflection; CriR = Critical reflection; S1 = Semester 1; S2 = Semester 2

Table 2

Topic Categories and Number of Coaches' Blog Posts

Topic Category	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total Number
1. Theories of coaching	88 (40.55%)	119 (51.52%)	207 (46.21%)
2. Own coaching practice	143 (65.90%)	147 (63.64%)	290 (64.73%)
3. Others' coaching practice	28 (12.90%)	30 (12.99%)	58 (12.95%)
4. Self-awareness	96 (44.24%)	112 (48.48%)	208 (46.43%)
5. Blogging	19 (8.76%)	17 (7.35%)	36 (8.03%)
5a. The use of the blog	12 (5.53%)	12 (5.19%)	24 (5.35%)
5b. Interacting with others online	7 (3.23%)	5 (2.16%)	12 (2.68%)

Note. Total percentage exceeds 100% as a single blog post (n = 448) could fit into more than one category.

Table 3

Coaches' Blog Posts According to Hatton and Smith's (1995) Framework

Level of reflection	Semester 1	Semester 2	Total Number
Descriptive writing	35 (16.13%)	15 (6.49%)	50 (11.16%)
Descriptive reflection	133 (61.29%)	120 (51.95%)	253 (56.47%)
Dialogic reflection	48 (22.12%)	86 (37.23%)	134 (29.91%)
Critical reflection	2 (0.92%)	9 (3.90%)	11 (2.45%)