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Using shared online blogs to structure and support informal coach learning.

Part 2: The participants' view and implications for coach education

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Using shared online blogs to structure and support informal coach learning

Part 2: The participants' view and implications for coach education

In part one of this paper, Stoszkowski and Collins (2015) showed that shared online blogs were a useful tool to structure and support the informal learning of a cohort of final year undergraduate sports coaching students. The aim of the present study was to offer insight into student coaches' perceptions of their use and experiences of structured group blogging for reflection and learning. Twenty-three student coaches (5 females, 18 males), purposely sampled from the original study, took part in four semi-structured focus group interviews. Interview data were inductively analysed. Student coaches were generally very positive about their learning experiences and the pedagogical approach employed. This was especially apparent in terms of perceived increases in levels of reflection, knowledge acquisition and improvements in coaching practice; changes corroborated by the data presented in part one. A range of reasons emerged for these outcomes, alongside several potential limiters of engagement in shared group blogging as a learning endeavour. Whilst these findings support recent, and growing proposals to systematically incorporate Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs into coach education pedagogy, several key considerations for the process of using such tools are outlined. Finally, the implications for coach educators are discussed.

Keywords: coach learning; coach education; coach development; reflective practice; communities of practice; online

Introduction

In recent years, a growing field of research and practice has emerged relating to the potential use of Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate and enhance learning in a number of educational fields and learning environments, including teacher training (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012), medical education (Whitcomb, 2003) and higher education (Churchill, 2009). In particular, collaborative learning and reflective conversation are

said to be a key potential outcome of the use of such tools (Freeman & Brett, 2012), with the social constructivist theoretical lens of ‘communities of practice’ (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) used to frame the pedagogical design of such initiatives (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). In the field of sports coaching, building on the earlier work of Stoszkowski and Collins (2014a), the study reported by Stoszkowski and Collins (2015) in part one of this paper explored the potential of shared online group blogs for structuring and supporting the informal learning of sports coaches. Content analysis revealed that use of this collaborative and free to access online platform by four separate groups of practicing sports coaches resulted in increased collaboration and social interaction between group members, and the emergence of fully functioning, online CoPs (i.e. fulfilment of the three main interconnecting structural elements of Wenger et al’s, 2002 CoP framework – domain, community and practice). Additionally, each group blog served as a useful ‘space’ for the development of a more critical approach to reflective practice. Accordingly, Stoszkowski and Collins (2015) proposed that shared online blogs are a useful tool for coach educators to utilise in the design of coach education pedagogy.

However, whilst these authors posited potential reasons for the outcomes in part one of this paper (i.e. sufficient levels of ‘up front’ structure and the formal priming of reflection, as well as the on-going ‘scaffolding’ of blog activity), detailed insight into student coaches’ perceptions of their learning experiences, as well as reasons for, or barriers to, their engagement in blog discussion, is needed in order to illuminate the process of facilitative shared group blogging for coach learning. For example, to enable others to refine and optimise the approach for their own educational contexts, explanation for the observed intra and inter group differences in

the patterns and levels of engagement and/or participation in reflective blogging between group members is needed (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014a). Similarly, insight into the potential reasons for the lack of a linear development in the levels of student coaches' reflective thought as the academic year progressed is required. Based on these considerations, the purpose of this study was to provide an increased understanding of student coaches' perception and satisfaction relating to their use and experiences of structured group blogs for collaborative reflection and learning.

Method

Participants

As the focus of the present study was to determine how student coaches had experienced a specific coach education activity, the sample, which consisted of 23 final year undergraduate sports coaching students (5 females and 18 males – demographics as per part one of this paper, see Table 1), was purposively selected (Patton, 2002) using criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this regard, the student coaches were required to have completed a work placement based module incorporating a minimum of 40 hours coaching practice, whilst concurrently coaching in the community in a variety of paid and voluntary roles. At the same time, they had to have reflected on their on-going practical experiences in relation to five separate theoretical perspectives or 'themes'. The theme choices were driven by current but well founded directions in coaching and a desire from the module tutors to include topics they thought would be interesting and relevant (Jones, Morgan, & Harris, 2012). This reflection was undertaken collaboratively in small groups (one group with five members, two groups with six members and one group with seven members), through the auspices of shared (yet not publicly viewable) online blogs (cf. Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015).

Procedures

Ethical approval for the present study was granted from the university's research ethics committee and informed consent was obtained from all participants. As our main research question concerns the exploration of social processes, an interpretive research design was employed to elucidate the student coaches' views of their learning experiences and strengthen our understanding of related experiential and contextual influences (Turner & Nelson, 2009). During the final timetabled session of the module, four separate semi-structured focus group interviews (one with the members of each blog group) were conducted to gather data, with each one lasting an average of 56 minutes (range = 47-64 minutes). As such, focus group interviews were a convenient way to simultaneously collect data from several student coaches in a relatively short space of time before the end of the academic year. The use of focus group interviews also encouraged student coaches to question, challenge, and comment on each other's experiences (Kitzinger, 1995), which complimented the ethos of the module and served as a useful end of module 'debrief' for each blog group. In addition, the focus group method allowed us to examine and explore not only *what* student coaches thought about their learning experiences, but *how* and *why* they thought that way (Jones & Gratton, 2004).

The first author, who was an academic tutor on the course and an experienced coach educator trained in qualitative research methods, conducted all the interviews in an attempt to avoid inter-interview bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An interview guide, designed around the learning outcomes of the module, was used to structure the discussion and explore student coaches' educational experiences when using a shared group blog for reflection. In an attempt to enhance trustworthiness, the guide was crosschecked for its potential to elicit relevant responses through discussion between

the three authors (Cresswell, 2007). The original set of open-ended questions was deliberately broad so as not to lead student coaches' answers in any way (Abraham, Collins, & Martindale, 2006; e.g. 'How has the module impacted on you as a coach?' and 'How would you improve the group blogging process?').

To prepare student coaches for the interview, and enable them to ask preparatory questions, they were sent the interview guide five days prior to the interview (Christensen, 2014). All interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere using a small seminar room at the university. Each interview started with rapport building conversation and a general introduction, whereby the purpose of the study was explained to the student coaches, as well as their rights and a declaration of confidentiality (White & Thompson, 1995). Additionally, in considering potential power dynamics between tutor and student coaches, to reduce the likelihood of inhibited responses, assurances were made regarding the ability to speak freely without fear of any recriminations for their module grades (Millward, 2012). In-line with recommendations for the administration of focus groups (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013), open-ended prompts and follow-up elaboration and clarification probes (e.g. 'Can you provide us with a specific example of that?' and 'Why do you think that is the case?') were used to help evocate rich discussion, draw out clear and comprehensive descriptions and confirm or correct the interviewer's understanding of what was being said (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Although the same questions were asked in each group interview, the order of their presentation varied slightly between groups depending on the direction each discussion took (Patton, 2002). All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim, with word-processed transcripts checked twice against the audio recording to ensure they were representative of what was said.

Data Analysis

In line with the studies' overall interpretivist epistemology, the raw group interview data were inductively analysed (Patton, 2002) using the data analysis software Nvivo 10 and following a three-stage process for organising and interpreting qualitative data (Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2013). First, each interview transcript was read at least twice by all three authors, before the first author, who had conducted all the interviews, analysed each one line by line to identify standalone meaning units (i.e. raw participant quotations or tutor comments of varying length that exemplify a meaningful thought, point or piece of information). This allowed for thick description to be reflected in the results (Creswell, 2003). The meaning units were then labelled with a provisional description of the topic. Second, the meaning units were compared for similarities and organised into raw data themes. Third, the analysis then proceeded to a higher level of abstraction, whereby the raw data themes were compared and contrasted, and built up into larger and more general themes in a higher order concept (Côté et al., 1993). This process allowed for the constant refinement of the results until theoretical saturation occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

At regular intervals during the data analysis, sample data sets were examined by the second and third author, with any issues of contention discussed until a consensus of opinion was reached. To further increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, the coding process was also discussed on three separate occasions with a colleague, knowledgeable about coach development and trained in qualitative methodology, but blind to the objectives of the study (Krane, Andersen, & Streat, 1997; Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007). This discourse resulted in a high level of agreement between individuals, with only a small number of minor discrepancies

requiring adjustment or further rationale. Finally, a draft summary of results was emailed to student coaches, all of whom confirmed these results to be an accurate representation of their educational experiences whilst using shared group blogs.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate coaches' perceptions of their use of group blogs as a professional development tool during their undergraduate studies. The themes from the inductive content analysis of group interview data are presented in Figure 1 and discussed below. Quotes are used to enable the reader to gain a better appreciation of the context data were collected in.

Outcomes of group blog use

Reflection. Consistent with the findings of Churchill (2009), Ellison and Wu (2008), and Halic, Lee, Paulus, and Spence (2010), student coaches were generally very positive about their blogging experiences and acknowledged the value of group blogging as a professional development activity. Student coaches believed enhanced reflection to be an outcome of participation in structured group blogging, a factor that student coaches recognised in terms of both the amount and regularity of reflection they engaged in. In the words of C5, 'reflection was something that I just wasn't doing...I assess things differently now, I review my sessions more, and ensure I actually do a bit of reflection after it.' Furthermore, student coaches highlighted a perceived greater depth of reflective thought than usual, with a focus on self-awareness and the questioning of both current and previous practices particularly prevalent, as illustrated by A2:

'Normally when I coach, I just do what comes naturally, but in writing these blogs, it enabled me to take a step back and actually view my coaching from a

different view...this really put things into perspective and it made me think about the effect I actually have upon my environment by adopting these methods and sustaining my beliefs.'

Similarly, C6 felt that group blogging made him 'more aware of what I actually do when I'm coaching, more reflection on myself as a coach...because we might not know that we are actually doing that kind of thing until you actually reflect on it.'

Whilst, in a similar vein, C2 added:

'It challenges your beliefs doesn't it, and sort of what you think already. A couple of the themes, I've gone on their thinking "right, I know what this is about," but then I've been thinking "well do I actually know as much as I thought I did?"'

Knowledge. Student coaches commented in detail on how knowledge acquisition was a key outcome of group blog participation. In particular, and in line with previous research that suggests coaches learn most during less formal and self-directed learning activities (e.g. Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Wright et al., 2007), data showed that they felt they had learned more as a result of group blogging than they had done in other modules and external modes of coach education. B2 summed up this perception when he stated 'it's probably the best assignment that I've done in terms of learning...it's debateable if you actually learn anything with the other assignments...I've actually learned stuff out of this one, whereas I don't think I have in many others.'

Student coaches also emphasised an improved awareness and understanding of theoretical concepts, particularly in relation, but not limited to, the five 'themes' that were covered during the module. For example, A1 commented on his growing awareness of the theoretical concepts that underpinned some of his practice:

‘Some of the themes, you have been doing it to some extent before, but you maybe didn’t have a name for it...like the theme on Bloom, you might have been asking questions, but you didn’t know the theory or aim behind it.’

Moreover, the data highlighted that, as a result of their increased theoretical knowledge, student coaches felt better able to justify their opinions as well as provide evidence for their coaching practice when challenged by others. B3 exemplified this when he commented ‘before, if someone asked me why I did something, I could never explain it...I could never properly come back to them and say “well this is why”, but now I think I could.’ Similarly, C4 described his interactions with the parents of his participants, and how he was better able to justify his decisions and methods by underpinning them with evidence:

‘I can say “actually, I’m doing it this way because this is what I’m going to get out of it in 6 weeks time”, and they’ll accept that...they look at me as a coach and think “he knows what he is on about”...they just leave me to the sessions and just let me go with it.’

Perceived improved coaching practice. A key determinant in measuring the effectiveness of reflective activity is the ability to bring about meaningful change to practice (Alterio, 2004). In the present study, a simple but crucial and oft-stated concept was the perceived improvement of coaching practice, both in terms of student coaches becoming more adept at planning sessions and their actual coaching sessions being more effective. C5 highlighted this:

‘I think I approach my sessions differently now...I went in with a very strict plan of how I wanted things done...now I accept flexibility with the sessions, so I adapt to what the participants need and not what I want from them.’

Whilst C3 added ‘I think every theme that we have gone through was relevant and it’s helped my coaching massively...I feel like I’m more flexible because of it, I’m not just directing and one-dimensional.’

Reasons for outcomes

Support. Data highlighted that the support that was available during group blogging was crucial in facilitating learning. Reinforcing suggestions that moderators play an integral role in enhancing and nurturing the functioning of online communities (e.g. Andrew, 2010; Gray, 2005; Johnson, 2001), student coaches emphasised the important role that tutor support played in guiding the learning process, especially in terms of keeping blog discussions on track. For example, B5 noted ‘if someone was going off topic, Rob (a tutor, pseudonym) would say it’s a bit irrelevant this...and then they’d pose a question to get us back on track...keeping us on our toes.’ Likewise, student coaches found that the challenges tutors would set in blog comments from time to time would help to instigate and guide reflective thought. D1 commented on this when recounting his experiences, ‘Rob set a challenge on ours, he gave us a scenario, so “what would you do if this?” and it made you stop and think about what you’d do, so it was good, really useful.’ This finding is resonant of Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of ‘scaffolding’, whereby a scaffold offered student coaches guidance on what elements of a problem needed to be attended to and what knowledge may be required (Abraham & Collins, 2011).

It has been noted that coaches predominantly learn informally from other coaches (Culver & Trudel, 2006; Erickson et al., 2008; Lemyre et al., 2007), and previous research into the use of blogs for learning has highlighted the valuable role of peer interaction in learning (e.g. Churchill, 2009). In this study, all student coaches

were quick to acknowledge the central role played by peer support in sustaining their learning, particularly with regards to the sharing of feedback and ideas between group members. In C1's words:

'It's picking up tips off each other as well, just the way different people go about things, you go "oh I might have a try of that" and then you experiment with it in your next session and see if it works...then you can come back on the blog and say "well I used your tip" and discuss how it went.'

This is despite suggestions that the formalising of membership and participation in a community hinders the creation and sharing of knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1998; Silva, Goel, & Mousavidin, 2008). Relatedly, the different content and material that group members would often share and signpost each other to (i.e. videos, articles, literature) was viewed as being valuable for learning. D5 highlighted the benefits of this and commented:

'Quite a few times within ours, people were saying "try looking at this" and then they'd post you to a book or a video or something like that, so that enabled you to learn from reading that...that helped quite a lot within our blog.'

Nevertheless, there was also a clear view that the willingness of group members to go beyond mere information exchange, and engage in meaningful peer discussion on a topic, was particularly important for learning. Indeed, Choi, Land, and Turgeon (2005) note how multiple perspectives can help learners identify differences in understandings and weaknesses in their explanations. D3 reinforced this view by saying that, 'the good thing is we don't always agree...instead of just going "yeah I completely agree, I think it's fantastic", we kind of said well "no, actually I don't really agree with that", and it's playing devil's advocate.'

As such, through their blog interactions, student coaches became both the teacher and the learner as they engaged in reflective practice (Byington, 2011). These findings again echo Vygotsky's (1978) contention that an individual's learning can be enhanced through engagement with others, therefore enabling the extension of that individual's proficiency to a new level (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008). Indeed, the comments from student coaches appear to describe what Goos, Galbraith, and Renshaw, (2002, pp. 197-198) term a 'collaborative zone of proximal development', whereby learning is 'scaffolded' by peer-to-peer mentoring (Gray, 2005; Gunawardena et al., 2009).

Format. It was reported that the format of group blogging better facilitated learning, especially in terms of the writing style being more 'relaxed' than other formats of writing and assessment. C4 stated 'it just seems less pressured...more laid back compared to other assignments where you're concerned about word counts and stuff like that and third person all the time', whilst C7 agreed, adding that 'it's good to have that freedom, it's not like a 3000 word essay or something...you don't feel afraid to write stuff that otherwise you feel would get pushed aside.' Similarly, the writing format of group blogging was explicitly viewed as being less 'academic', which encouraged student coaches to contribute and facilitated intelligibility. For example, A4 remarked how being able to 'write little bits at a time is so much easier...you are not stuck in front of a computer for a day writing it.' Similarly, D4 summed up the general consensus of the group well when he stated:

'I'm absolutely rubbish at writing assignments, but I can write on a blog all day because you can write how you speak, so it was quite useful in that way...I found this so much easier to be able to explain what I meant.'

Accessibility. Previous research has concluded that coaches often resist educational opportunities due to logistical constraints such as location and timing (Turner & Nelson, 2009; Vargas-Tonsing, 2007). Encouragingly, the data in the present study suggest that blogging was more accessible than other modes of formal coach education, especially due to the decreased reliance on attendance; as such, group blogs were viewed as being convenient, which student coaches felt better-facilitated learning as they felt able to engage in the process when it was most appropriate for them. For example, C6 recounted how he would switch off in lectures, whereas ‘when you’re at home, you can do it in your own time when you feel in the correct state of mind to do it.’ Similarly, C2 felt the increased convenience and accessibility of group blogging as a learning activity led to him engaging and contributing more, stating:

‘You can pick the time when you work best. So if you work better at night...then it’s better for you isn’t it...I think that brought out better responses from people, it’s like they went with a better attitude to their phone or their computer to write something on the blog.’

It has been suggested that mobile and/or handheld technologies are important tools supporting the educational application of blogs (Churchill, 2011). Indeed, student coaches reported that convenience and accessibility was enhanced as a result of the blog platform being available as an application on mobile telephones and tablet computers. B4 surmised the views of the group well when he suggested:

‘It’s just dead accessible...you can get it on your phone, like an app. You can just whack it on if you’re on your bus or you’re on the train and just do it there and then...everyone has got Internet and laptops and iPads, so it just makes it dead easy for everyone.’

Integrates theory with practice. Nash and Sproule (2009) suggest that contextually relevant material and activities in coach education courses helps to increase students' interest in learning. Student coaches in the current study emphasised the extent to which the blogging process was grounded in, and inherently linked to, the realities of their everyday coaching practice; hence, they felt better able to experiment with and apply theoretical concepts. For example, A6 commented how group blogging was a 'way of reflecting on your own coaching practice when you are out there coaching...that aspect of it is brilliant in terms of you're reflecting on your own coaching', whilst D2 felt that her group blog had been:

'The most relevant assignment in terms of my coaching...because all the rest it's completely theory based and you never get a chance to implement anything. Whereas this one, it's like "go and try this in your coaching and come back and tell us what you thought"...and that works better for me.'

Indeed, when asked to elaborate on an earlier comment relating to his blogging experiences, C4 added:

'I found that supporting what I was saying with academic literature really opened my eyes to what theorists had to say about a specific theme...maintaining each theme for a month really gave me a good amount of time to link my experiences with that topic.'

Potential limiters of engagement

Each group blog was not without its challenges, and student coaches identified some potential limiters of engagement and deterrents to participation.

Competing commitments. A minority of student coaches expressed frustration with the on-going nature of group blogging and the fact it required regular participation

over an extended period of time. This was usually reported as a result of their engagement being impacted on, and mediated by, competing commitments. For example, A5 described how her commitments outside of the course would take up her time and limit her participation at certain times during the year; ‘personally I found it very hard to keep logging on...because I have three jobs as well as playing hockey, and a life! I’ve enjoyed doing it and I’ve learned from it, but I struggled with that a little bit.’ Likewise, some student coaches admitted that their levels of engagement would drop at specific points during the year when they had deadlines for assessed work in other modules. This was exemplified when A1 admitted, ‘I struggled before Christmas because I had so many assignments...and obviously everyone has got research and stuff due in in the second semester.’

Attitude. It was clear from the data that the attitude with which student coaches approached group blogging was important. Some individuals recognised that their ability to manage their time affected their participation, especially with regards to being proactive and making blog entries in a timely manner. B6 perhaps best summarised this when he admitted:

‘I’m just not very good at time management...I’m terrible for it, everything I do I will do last minute. If I was to get more involved with it I feel I could learn quite a lot from it...it’s not the structure of it, it’s myself...I’m not engaging as much as I possibly should have to get the most out of it.’

Equally, a number of student coaches stressed that meaningful engagement in blogging required an inherent desire to learn and improve, with D3 concluding that ‘it comes down to what D2 said before...you’re either here for the qualification and just getting by, or you actually want to learn and develop and you want to engage and get discussion going.’

Group dynamics. It was clear from the data that the dynamics between group members played a key role in facilitating or limiting engagement and interaction. For example, it was reported that group members needed to be willing and able to provide each other with constructive criticism, but that this had to be framed in a way so as not to be interpreted as ‘offensive’. C3 described how it was important that group members did not ‘go in there all guns blazing just putting them down, because they won’t reply’ adding that ‘it’s definitely about putting it across in a manner that you’re not trying to be offensive to that person.’ Student coaches also suggested that this required the development of an online environment that instilled group members with the confidence to post on the group blog, without fear of being judged for their ideas. Student coaches intimated that this took time to develop, which would result in some group members taking a back seat initially. A5 alluded to this when she said:

‘Once I saw that a lot of other people were starting to go into more depth about how they felt about it and how their coaching was going, I think it made it a lot easier to express how I felt and why...I knew they wouldn’t judge me.’

Gunawardena et al. (2009) would confirm this view, suggesting that participation in collaborative discourse can be influenced by an individual’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Indeed, Ardichvili (2008) suggest that fear of criticism and ‘losing face’ is often a barrier to the development of online CoPs. For example, those who put forward a novel idea might fear providing knowledge that is not valued by their peers, leading to embarrassment (Neelen & Fetter, 2010). Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that some student coaches may be psychosocially isolationist by preference (Andrew, 2010), whilst it has been suggested that people are more likely to collaborate and/or take risks in groups when they already know each other (Kling & Courtright, 2003). As such, groups that develop a high level of trust are likely to

encourage a greater attitude of ‘risk’, and when risk is rewarded, more trust is likely to develop (Kling & Courtright, 2003).

Furthermore, Wenger et al. (2002) refer to CoPs needing a ‘rhythm’ of events and rituals that reassert their presence over time (Gray, 2005). In the present study, the dynamic between group members was often referred to in terms of the importance of an attitude of shared responsibility to instigate and maintain blog interaction. For example, C6 highlighted the importance of group members being committed to posting early in each theme to ensure enough time for valuable interaction to emerge when he said ‘you’ve got to get the ball rolling early within the themes and get that discussion going early. If you get it going early, you can get it going and going and going.’ Similarly, D1 alluded to the importance of cultivating a feeling of give and take between student coaches, when he commented:

‘I’ve maintained a sense of pride and personal reward for having the ability to potentially influence and assist people, but also benefit from what other people can offer me to improve me as a coach...we were assisting one another to enhance ourselves and expand our knowledge...making us into the best coaches we could possibly be.’

Structure of entries. The data suggest that the structure of individual blog entries would often facilitate or hamper blog interaction and discussion between group members. For example, entries lacking a discursive quality, especially in terms of the inclusion of suitable questions for others to respond to, were seen as a barrier to garnering discussion. B4 noted how the make-up of one particular post encouraged him to comment back, saying ‘it wasn’t talking about the same thing all the way through, I think there was like four questions in it that you could respond to...and they were good questions that made me think about it.’ Johnson (2001) notes that

different types and lengths of message can cause problems for asynchronous discussion and effective channels of communication in CoPs. Indeed, in the present study, student coaches drew attention to the length of some entries, as well as the extent to which they stimulated the reader. In particular, it was clear that entries that were overly long and ‘boring’ were a big deterrent to interaction. Instead, it was suggested that shorter, punchier entries prompted and encouraged better debate. For example, B1 expressed frustration at the length of one post:

‘No one commented because I don’t think anyone could be bothered reading it...and it was so boring as well, there was nothing there where I thought “yeah I could use that”, that might be in the middle somewhere but I couldn’t get there...You need two paragraphs, three tops...short and catchy.’

Finally, it has been suggested that the use of technology such as blogs can result in the misinterpretation of messages due to the absence of the non-verbal cues and feedback that are otherwise present in face-to-face interaction (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008). In the present study, student coaches viewed blog entries that contained ambiguous content as limiters of collaboration and engagement, whereby readers would simply ignore entries that were not clear in the points they were making. Indeed, A6 was acutely aware of how ambiguity in his own writing style would influence the other members of his group from time to time, admitting ‘some of mine were really weird to read, and not everyone understood where I was coming from sometimes...I know some people had to put it into other words, almost like a translation!’ Nevertheless, as outlined above, the group blogs appeared to eliminate many of the constraints of face-to-face coach education and learning by providing a convenient, accessible and highly interactive environment (Byington, 2011; Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). In addition, Johnson (2001) suggests that the lack of face-to-

face contact in text-based communication can actually be an advantage as it suppresses traditional group norm behaviour.

General Discussion and Conclusion

Whilst we recognise the limits of what can be accomplished by a relatively small scale and short-term study of this nature, the results reported in the current two-part paper suggest that, when appropriately structured and managed, group blogs have the potential to effectively support collaborative coach learning and development and the emergence of CoP. Moreover, student coaches positively perceived group blogging as a tool to facilitate reflection and learning and believed it led to improvements in applied coaching practice. Therefore, we believe that group blogs hold great potential in coach education as a pedagogical tool to encourage collaborative learning and the emergence of CoPs as part of a professional development strategy, especially when we consider the barriers to formal coach education that are commonly reported (e.g. cost, accessibility, timing, geographical dispersal, cf. Cushion et al., 2010), and the increasing calls for national governing bodies of sport to increase the opportunities for coaches to engage in informal learning opportunities that permit social interaction (Lemyre et al., 2007; Piggott, 2015). Nevertheless, the findings in the current study also suggest that, in order to maximise coach learning using group blogs, there are some key considerations that national governing bodies and coach educators must bear in mind in order to maximise the potential of such a tool.

First, it is important to remember that blogs are an enabling technology, rather than technology that directly results in the learning of particular knowledge and skills (Churchill, 2011); therefore, the positive results reported in the current study cannot be attributed to the use of group blogs alone. In particular, careful use of the terminology of CoP is needed, as CoPs cannot simply be designed or established, they

can only emerge (Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 1998). More specifically, coach educators might use group blogs as a tool to support the informal learning and growth of coaches, but fully functioning CoP is not an automatic result of utilising such a tool (Roberts, 2006; Silva et al., 2009). In the current study, we were able to use the concept of CoP as a descriptive model for the observed social practices that emerged as a result of group blog use; however, that does not mean group blogs are a prescriptive model for CoP in coach education *per se* (Piggott, 2015).

Second, we suggest that the self-directed learning and collaborative reflection in the current study were facilitated and significantly enhanced by the formal structures that were put in place (i.e. prescribed themes supported by up front workshops and on-going tutor support) to ‘scaffold’ and direct use of the online tool (Hew & Cheung, 2013). For example, coaches possess complex and deeply-held values and beliefs about what constitutes good and bad coaching practice (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014b), and they might not have considered or explored the social norms or underlying assumptions that influence the personal coaching theories and philosophies that drive their behaviour (Abraham & Collins, 2011). As such, the preliminary workshops in the current study played an important role in outlining the importance of critically reflective practice and providing student coaches with the underpinning theoretical knowledge the process requires in order to help them uncover and challenge established or ineffective thinking (Peel, Cropley, Hanton, & Fleming, 2013). This, we feel, helps to ensure that student coaches would be less susceptible to the transmission of dogma or irrational beliefs when the process of group blogging began (Piggott, 2015). Indeed, CoPs are by no means ‘benign’ and do not develop and function in a vacuum (Cox 2005; Roberts, 2006); therefore, the social ‘milieu’ is potentially a major factor when coaches co-create and transfer knowledge

(cf. Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014b). As such, the benefit of the use of structured group blogs is as much about developing the craft and tacit knowledge required in order to reflect FOR action, as opposed to merely reflecting ON action (Dixon, Lee, & Ghaye, 2013).

Similarly, meaningful peer interactions (like those observed in the present study) rely on thoughtful and personalised questions or critical and contextualised feedback; however, question-askers need a certain level of domain or metacognitive knowledge to be able to propose such questions or feedback (Choi et al., 2005). Therefore, coach educators must consider how they can best help coaches acquire the knowledge needed to scaffold and guide meaningful online collaboration (Choi et al., 2005), without losing the attraction of what was clearly perceived to be a ‘less formal’ mode of coach education in the current study. Moreover, coach educators planning to use group blogs to develop CoP must consider the leadership role of the moderator or coordinator in creating and sustaining an effective learning environment (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008). The role of this person is to act as a ‘gentle guide’ who facilitates and nudges the discussion and learning between group members (Cox, 2005), and they are likely to be very busy behind the scenes. Key characteristics of this person include technical competence with the platform, an understanding of developing social connections, and sufficient knowledge in the areas under consideration to demonstrate credibility (Gray, 2005) and lead debate. As such, careful selection and training of these individuals is most probably required.

Finally, the size of a group blog (i.e. number of group members) is an important consideration. In the interests of scale and efficiency, coach educators may be tempted to try and establish larger and more open online communities than the small closed groups of student coaches utilised in the current study. However, further

research and active experimentation may be needed to in order to determine the ‘optimum’ group size needed to encourage the collaboration and knowledge generation more common in smaller and more closed groups (Hall & Graham, 2004). For example, information overload and ephemeral social relationships are potential negative consequences of larger online communities (Von Krogh, 2002); indeed, Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that very large CoP are structured into subgroups (e.g. by region) in order to encourage active participation and contribution by all group members. In addition, it is important to note that the initial discussions between group members in the present study were predicated by face-to-face contact during initial, up front workshops (i.e. before group blogging began) and supplemental periodic workshops; therefore, some group members had met each other before commencing their ‘online’ interactions. Whilst student coaches made no mention of this as a contributory factor to their learning experiences (either positively or negatively), the existing literature holds a mixed view, with a number of authors suggesting that multimodal learning (i.e. face-to-face contact mixed with online learning) makes it easier to build trust and rapport between members in online groups (e.g. Kling & Courtright, 2003). Interestingly, Dubé et al. (2006) suggest that temporary or time limited online CoPs (as utilised in the current study) may undergo less difficulty when face-to-face contact is lacking, as a high level of energy is likely to be invested by group members from the start due to the narrow focus and certainty of aims and objectives of the venture. Additionally, online only communication has been said to reduce or ‘equalise’ the potentially negative impact of the traditional group norms caused by face-to-face contact (e.g. voice, stature, physical reactions), which influence and shape social interaction (Roberts, 2006), although insight is lacking into issues such as the configuration and potential influence of power dynamics on

participation, as well as the impact of pre-existing conditions such as habitus and social codes on collective learning and the negotiation of meaning (cf. Roberts, 2006). Nevertheless, this is an especially relevant consideration when, for example, we consider coaches' often less than optimal perceptions of traditional formal learning methods and processes (cf. Cushion et al., 2010). The ways coach developers balance coaches' preference and desire for informal coach learning, whilst providing the necessary 'formal' structures highlighted above, are therefore crucial.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Focus Group ^a	Coach	Gender	Age	Sport coached	Years experience	Highest coaching award
A	A1	M	22	Soccer	7	L1
	A2	M	21	Soccer	7	L2
	A4	M	22	Multisport	7	L1
	A5	F	20	Disability	5	L2
	A6	M	21	Multisport	5	L1
B	B1	M	22	Rugby union	5	L1
	B2	M	21	Rugby union	6	L1
	B3	M	20	Rugby league	6	L1
	B4	M	21	Rugby league	5	L1
	B5	M	25	Rugby league	6	L1
	B6	M	22	Rugby league	6	L1
C	C1	M	22	Soccer	7	L2
	C2	M	26	Soccer	5	L2
	C3	M	23	Soccer	7	L1
	C4	M	20	Soccer	7	L1
	C5	F	21	Soccer	7	L1
	C6	M	20	Soccer	5	L3
	C7	F	20	Soccer	4	L1
D	D1	M	21	Soccer	5	L2
	D2	F	21	Basketball	5	L2
	D3	M	20	Table tennis	4	L1
	D4	M	21	Soccer	5	L2
	D5	F	21	Gymnastics	7	L3

Note. M = Male, F = Female. Coach A3 withdrew from the study prior to focus group interviews. Highest coaching award refers to level of UK coaching certificate endorsed framework.

^aFocus group interviews involved same participants from each group blog in part one of this paper (cf. Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015).

Raw data themes	First-order themes	Second-order themes	Umbrella themes
Acquire habit of regular reflection	Reflection	Learning	Outcomes of group blog use
More questioning of practice			
Greater self awareness			
Learn more	Knowledge		
Enhanced understanding of theory			
Better ability to justify opinions			
Evidence base for practice			
Better planning	Perceived improved practice		
Better sessions			
Tutors help keep content ‘on track’	Tutor support	Support	Reasons for outcomes
Tutors can set bespoke challenges	Peer support		
Sharing feedback/ideas			
Posting of useful material		Format	
Learning through peer discussion			
More relaxed style of writing			
Easier to write bite size chunks	Accessibility		
Less ‘academic’			
Reduced need for attendance			
Can undertake when convenient	Integrates theory with practice		
App available for phone/tablet			
Practice based			
Encourages application of theory			
Other work/life commitments	Competing commitments	Commitment	Potential limiters of engagement
Other assignments	Attitude		
Time management			
Requires a desire to learn	Group dynamics		
Use of constructive criticism			
Confidence to post on blog			
Feeling of shared responsibility	Structure of entries		
Inclusion of questions			
Overly long/boring entries			
Ambiguous content			

Figure 1. Results of qualitative analysis of raw group interview data displaying hierarchical themes that become progressively larger and more general.