

## Central Lancashire Online Knowledge (CLoK)

Title	Conceptualizing the adventure-sports coach
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/12420/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/12420/</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2011.611283">https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2011.611283</a>
Date	2012
Citation	Collins, L., and Collins, D. (2012) Conceptualizing the adventure-sports coach. Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 12 (1). pp. 81-93. ISSN 1472-9679
Creators	Collins, L., and Collins, D.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2011.611283>

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This is a pre-proof corrected manuscript, as accepted for publication, of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor*

*Learning* on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2011, available online:

[http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14729679.2011.611283#.VedFS\\_IVhBc](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14729679.2011.611283#.VedFS_IVhBc)

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## Conceptualizing the Adventure-sports Coach

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### Abstract

As a comparatively recent development, the adventure-sports coach struggles for a clear and distinct identity. The generic term 'instructor' no longer characterizes the role and function of this subgroup of outdoor professionals. Indeed, although the fields of adventure/outdoor education and leadership are comparatively well researched, the arrival of this 'new kid on the block' appears to challenge both the adventure-sports old guard and traditional views of sports coaching. In an attempt to offer clarity and stimulate debate, this paper attempts to conceptualize the adventure sports coach in the context of the existing roles in the field and current motivations for activity in the outdoors. We identify issues that are specific to the adventure-sports coach while also recognizing those skills and competencies shared with other professionals, both in the adventure sports profession and traditional sports coaching fields. Based on this review, we offer a conceptual model which may be used to focus debate, stimulate research and, at a possible later stage, to underpin accreditation, training and professional development.

*Keywords:* Training, development, professional development

## Introduction

Increased participation in adventure sports<sup>1</sup> has generated a demand for quality coaching. This, in turn, has led to the emergence of adventure-sports coaches as a subgroup of adventure sports professionals. Unfortunately, however, the lack of a defined role within the outdoor profession and a myriad of definitions of coaching practice in the broader context have left the adventure-sports coach without a clearly delineated role or function.

This vagary has a number of potential causes. Historically, the related domains of leadership and education have dominated research in the outdoors and, as a result, both have (at least anecdotally) clear status within the outdoor industry. As a second consideration, clearer definition of the roles of teachers and guides in adventure sports has highlighted a gap in the market, that of learning to undertake the activities themselves. As a consequence many outdoor professionals refer to themselves as coaches, exploiting this 'gap' within their own profession's models of practice. Finally, perception of an increasingly litigious background to health and safety in outdoor activities and society in general (Gill, 2007, pp. 21–23; Young, 2010, p. 19) has independently co-existed with a drive for the establishment of a coaching profession in traditional sports. This, in turn, has created a role for the adventure-sports coach that is distinct from guiding and teaching in this context. Acting in parallel, these factors have served to further exacerbate the lack of clarity associated with the adventure-sports coach roles.

In an attempt to further debate and promote clarity, this paper will explore the role of the coach in adventure sports, and ways in which it may usefully be delineated from other linked but distinct professions. As a consequence, we will conceptualize the position of the adventure-sports coach in a professional context by considering the

parallel roles of guide and teacher in the outdoor environment. Such clarity can clearly aid the development of the professions and the field by stimulating debate, and eventual agreement, on the goals, skills and characteristics of each.

We will use the terms ‘adventure-sports coach’, ‘teacher’ and ‘guide’. In this context we have considered a guide as a person whose primary role is one of leading in the outdoors, providing an experience to the specification of his/her clients. By contrast, the teacher is one who uses the outdoors as a medium for personal development while the adventure-sports coach is one whose role is primarily that of technical skill development. For a variety of reasons, we have avoided the generic term ‘instructor’; first, because it is a redundant term in the broader traditional sports context and is no longer in general use. Second, because the term is generic within the outdoor field and, where it is still used, encompasses a wide range of roles that include guide, teacher and adventure-sports coach. As such, the term serves only to further cloud what we see as important differences with crucial consequences for training, accreditation and practice. For these reasons, together with the need for the field to move on, we see the term as redundant or at least in need of greater discussion than this paper can offer.

### **The ‘new kid on the block’—a context for confusion!**

At one level the emergence of the adventure-sports coach role is clear. The growth of competitive elements in various adventure sports such as competition climbing, adventure racing and extreme racing (on foot, in kayak and or skis) has led to a demand for a coach in the traditional sporting context, namely, a means of developing skills and performance. The similarity with an instructional role is clear; semantic differences in which instructional behaviour is constrained by syllabus content, or pedagogic methodology and a coaching role in which the individual is prioritized

above that of the syllabus or pedagogic doctrine will remain and are essentially a philosophical discussion.

In other, more established elements of the outdoor profession, however, the debate highlights a need for a definition of coaching within adventure activities and the identification of a philosophical and pedagogic position for coaching practice in adventure sports. In this context the term and role of an adventure-sports coach appear to be more complex than the definitions used in traditional sporting settings or those advocated by the instructional programmes of the National Governing Bodies. The recent growth in participation has obliged adventure-sports coaches to explore their own coaching practices. As a result, it has been found that many coaching principles associated with other sports may not be transferable into the wider adventure sports context (Ives, 2008). Furthermore, the conservatism of the adventure sports/outdoor education profession has, perhaps, led to reluctance to accept a change in terminology. This has polarized the teaching versus coaching debate within adventure sports, mirroring somewhat that in traditional sports, both parties taking positions based on institutional practice, cultural/historical perceptions and commercial influences. Conversely, as others have suggested, the commonalities between teaching and coaching practice (Jones, 2007) can reduce these pedagogical stances to an issue of semantics and philosophy. As such, clarification is the least of requirements for the adventure coaching profession and professional.

Chester (2009, 2010) attempts to open the debate on the nature of coaching in adventure sports, viewing coaching as performance development for all performers and not purely the development of elite performances in competitive settings. His papers present a philosophical position of coaching practice as it has evolved in the National Outdoor Centres (Plas y Brenin, North Wales and Glenmore Lodge,

Scotland) in the United Kingdom, offering one of the few attempts to articulate the nature of adventure-sports coaching. He broadly argues that adventure-sports coaching can refer to all developmental activities that fall under the banner of adventure sports and that coaching, leadership and developmental skills are transferable. This 'broad church' approach is appealing in its simplicity, but still begs the questions that have driven so much debate.

In fact, a simple and clear identity for coaching is difficult to define in any field. The image of a sports coach (think clip board, stopwatch and whistle) does not apply easily to the executive, life or adventure-sports coach, nor does it fit with the recognition of multiple roles for conventional sports coaching presented by current coach accreditation. For example, current thinking in the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (The UK Coaching Framework, 2009) reflects a matrix of specialist roles (e.g. Performance, Performance Development, Participation and Children) against a recognition of level, or proficiency independent of the type of athlete coached (Côté, Young, Duffy, & North, 2007). This emerged against a traditional backdrop of better coaches working with better performers, which further confuses the position of the adventure-sports coach role where both the interaction of performer ability and environments are significant.

The coaching of adventure sports also struggles to achieve recognition because of multiple definitions and the complexity of practice. This leads, in turn, to an ineffectual conceptual framework of coaching activity in adventure sports. For example, Corfu and Kauffman (2009) point to a 'fuzziness' in how coaches define their coaching interaction as the problem, while Parsloe and Wray (2000) attribute the lack of clarity in any definition as a consequence of the rapid development in the field, describing this as 'an intellectual revolution'. In summary, the rapid growth of

coaching in adventure sports, poor definition of roles within the outdoor profession and multiple definitions of coaching activity across other domains leave the coaching discipline with issues of direction and focus.<sup>2</sup>

### **Delineation by goal—considering the target outcome**

The majority of definitions of coaching activity outline a long-term relationship that places the participant at the centre of the process. The length of the relationship appears to be driven by the participant and is highly personalized. The reasons are common with many sports, however, the length, pace and content of the relationship are led by the participant rather than by external influences and constitute an area worthy of further research. Consequently, in order to more fully understand the role of the adventure-sports coach, it may be better to consider the reasons for participation in adventure sports. In this regard, Miller and Kerr (2002) recognize the need to acknowledge the motivations for participation beyond the pursuit of medals and victories. Vallerand (2004, p. 427) acknowledges that ‘motivation represents one of the most important variables in sport’. In similar fashion, Bailey, Collins, Ford, McNamara, Toms, and Pearce (2009) propose that reasons for participation reflect a range of motivations, identifying the pursuit of excellence that may be either elite referenced (I am the best in XXXXX—Elite Referenced Excellence), personally referenced (I am getting better than I was—Personally Referenced Excellence), or, even more personally, participation for wellbeing (I do this because I enjoy it and it makes me feel good—Participation for Personal Wellbeing). Bailey et al. (2009) contend that, for any sport or governing body, a balance of provision between all three and development of the capacity for individuals to move seamlessly from one goal to another (across the lifespan for example) are crucial aims: but how do these targets fit with the current picture in adventure sports?

With regard to Elite Referenced Excellence, adventure sport competition has certainly resulted in an increase in participation for these motivations, although the purist debate surrounding the adventurous nature of sports in which the environment is manufactured to the extent of climbing walls, artificial white water courses or ‘pisted’ ski runs will surely remain. Also, specifically within this definition, are the individuals motivated to be the first person amongst their peers to ascend, descend, or cross a mountain, rock face, river, cave, gorge, sea, ice gap or continent? Personally Referenced Excellence also appears to be a significant reason for participation in adventure sports. Performers who are attempting to ‘push their grade’ climbing, descend a harder rapid or be better the next time are also characteristic of this group who frequently seek out adventure-sports coaching. Also falling within this category, the fashionable status of ‘risky sports’ created by the media glamorizes participation and creates credibility for participants amongst their peers and the broader public. As such, Personally Referenced Excellence as personal enhancement also remains a strong ‘driver’ in some participants. Finally, participation to maintain or improve elements of physical fitness and wellbeing, the ‘stay in shape’ motive, is shared with many sports and represents a final motive in this category.

Undoubtedly, and with regard to the third motive, Participation for Personal Wellbeing, participation in adventure sports is clearly not limited to the pursuit of excellence. The established ‘club culture’ in the UK, growth of e-based communities such as UK Rivers Guidebook, and the regular ‘course attendee’ across the various levels of centre/club or group all provide examples in an adventure sports setting in which the socialization element of participation is strong. Also in this category is the motive of personal renewal. The ‘cathartic process’ of adventure and challenge is recognized in many cultures. Indeed, this aspect has also driven the development of

adventure therapy (Priest & Gass, 2005). The counselling and therapeutic nature of adventure in either a formal or informal setting stimulates participation, with the involvement with nature being a facilitator for development (Louv, 2005).

### **Motivation for participation in adventure sports**

While the grouping of Bailey et al. (2009) seems to offer resonance with many reasons for participation in a range of sports, other motives should also be considered which may be more specific to adventure sports. For example, many organizations use the skills developed to participate in adventurous activities to translate directly into a professional context (i.e. work in the outdoors sector), or to recognize the transferable nature of the broader, and unspecific, ‘softer’ skills for other workplace settings. The use of the outdoors in the military to replicate the stresses and pressures of combat is well established, while the growth of ‘development training’ in the 1980s still contributes to the performance of managers and executives around the world. Participation for the sensations created by involvement also seems to influence adventure-sports participation; the sensation seekers (Zuckerman, 1994) who take part for the ‘buzz’ of feeling at risk. This is perhaps a consequence of the desire for and seeking out of risk as an element lacking in today’s society. Equally the pursuit of solitude, peace and quiet, isolation or social contact with friends drives people to seek out coaching that enables them to participate (Louv, 2005; Atherton, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

Acknowledgement that to work in adventure sports needs a degree of personal skill not necessarily required in traditional sports also drives some participants. Thus, Professionally Referenced Performance is driven by the acquisition of governing body awards: all governing body awards require logbook evidence at specific levels of performance and role-specific skills not widely used in general practice. These are used to develop both judgement and technical skills. As such, logbook requirements

and specific skills required to operate safely as a coach, guide or teacher in an outdoor context influence patterns of participation.

Finally, character building, a motive acknowledged but explicitly excluded from the report of Bailey et al. (2009) (although they cited both martial arts and ‘outward bound’ as examples of this), reflects a historical use of the outdoors which is well documented with strong traditions (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993).

Identification of this wide range of motives, only some of which find strong resonance in mainstream sport, supports the conclusion that a coach in the traditional definition may not address the full range of possible goals and motivation for adventure sports. In the broadest sense, an adventure-sports coach requires the skills to address all these needs. As such, clear delineation from other coaches exists although, as we will consider later in this paper, not all of the motives exemplified in this section will be the sole domain of the adventure-sports coach—the intensely personal nature of motivation will ensure that this aspect remains complex and multi-dimensional (Vallerand, 2004). However, if it is to be met, this breadth and complexity requires a skill set that encompasses those required by the leader and teacher drawn from educational, supervisory and leadership domains.

### **Delineation by the role of risk—a defining feature?**

Fundamentally, all these skill sets are preceded by the need to reflect the risks inherent in adventure activities: the risk of failure which could lead to physical injury and/or emotional injury (Mortlock, 1987) has to be managed by all professionals in the outdoors, the adventure-sports coach, teacher or guide. Management of risk with a degree of skill that ensures physical safety while still facilitating learning places demands on the adventure-sports coach; namely a personal ability in the activity in tandem with a deep understanding of the nature/level of risk in adventure learning that

enables it to be managed.

Risk characterizes a key management activity for adventure-sports coaches, while also reflecting reasons for some client participation and, indeed, the key factor for a few. In later, development-focused applications, risk becomes a key coaching and learning tool and, as such, is fundamental to the adventure-sports coach's role. Issues of goal setting, venue for practice, student ability and student development, social setting developed and potential changes to conditions all directly affect risk levels and have to be accommodated as a coaching episode develops. In short, the experience of risk and challenge is omnipresent in definitions of adventure sport and explicitly embedded within the adventure-sports coaching culture. It may be this cultural element that has led to an enviably low accident record and this is an area worthy of further research.

As Hunt (1990, p. 39) states: 'The potential for harm is inherent in the environment, because it is a natural environment'. Experiencing risk does not appear to be a sole motivator (Breakwell, 2007; Krein, 2007) for the majority of participants. The process of seeking out and benefiting from coaching may actually suggest that participants want to manage and control the level of risk encountered in their own adventures.

In saying that 'we should confront danger and take calculated risks, but only when we have developed the necessary skills and experience of tools', Brevik (2007, p. 11) acknowledges the need to develop the technical skills in order to manage risk at a personal level, obliging adventure-sport coaching practice to encourage independence. In this regard, the role of guide is well-established in the outdoors, clearly being to mitigate risk in a practical manner, leaving the client to 'lie back and enjoy it'. This focus seems to differ from the role of the adventure-sports coaches,

whose aims are to exploit risk in a manner that ensures a degree of challenge, maintains contextual accuracy and enhances learning; still ensuring overall safety yet also utilizing risk as a pedagogic tool.

This meta-judgement characterizes an element of the adventure-sports coach's role that is more explicit than in a conventional coaching context. Clearly, in adventure-sports coaching a balance has to be achieved without 'stepping over the line' from frontier adventure into misadventure (Mortlock, 1987), an element in common with the teacher's role. The decisions and judgements that maintain appropriate levels of physical risk form a key aspect of adventure-sports coaching practice. The decisions and judgements that maintain appropriate levels of psychological risk form a significant aspect of the teachers' practice. While all such coaches and teachers manage all aspects of risk to a greater or lesser degree, an adventure-sports coach actively manages physical risk as a tool, manipulating it as a distinct component of the environment and exploiting its benefits. This is a unique aspect of the adventure-sports coach's role. Bailie (2006a, 2006b, 2008) contextualizes the argument, proposing that challenge and risk are essential within society and education. He outlines the challenges faced by the adventure-sports coach and teacher in balancing the developmental benefits of risky experiences against the risks themselves. The adventure-sports coach must consider the balance between the benefit of the activity and the level of physical risk and this risk-benefit analysis (Gill, 2007, 2010) is the common practice employed by adventure-sports coaches and teachers to manage risk levels.

Clearly, culture within the outdoor community links ability as a coach with competency in practical risk management. This is most obviously recognized in the design of the governing body awards associated with the leadership and coaching in

adventure-sports. This link leads to clear standards of personal performance being required; in other words, the outdoor environment necessitates an independent, personal performance by the coach to fulfil their role. Thus, for example, a mountaineering coach has to have the navigational, movement and rope work skills to independently travel in the mountains if they are to focus on enhancing student performance and the safety of the group in that environment or a white water kayaking coach has to be able to kayak on white water with sufficient skills to lead and coach. This is an important and clear difference with sport, where a coach's level of (usually previous) experience and expertise as a performer is more usually seen as a 'nice to have' or is stipulated as needed only at a basic level. This need to perform is driven directly by the nature of the adventure environment. It is at this point that the need to operate in the more challenging environment becomes paramount and differentiates the coach from the teacher in this context and realigns the coach with the guide.

Within the outdoor community it is believed that risk recognition and management are products of experience, manifesting themselves in good judgements. In this regard, Ogilvie (1974) and Mortlock (1987) both suggest that reflection on relevant experiences is the basis for good judgement. It appears logical to conclude that reflection both in and on action (Schön, 1983) in relation to the management of risk will be significant in the development of adventure-sports coach practice. Although Moon (1999) suggests that Schön's definitions lack precision, reflection may be more embedded in general coaching practice amongst adventure-sports coaches than their sporting counterparts. Equally this may be a result of influences from the more established fields of outdoor and experiential education. Often it is unlikely to be 'in action' and is perhaps 'on action/in context', and this issue clearly

merits further study.

These skills are linked with an ability to reflect on and learn about judgement, based on their own and others' experience, suggesting a degree of metacognition. The ability to recognize, in reflection, the interaction of cues, goals, options and situational factors, forms a critical part of the adventure-sports coach's skill, over and above that required with regard to the sports-coaching process. This specific reflection, in turn, acts to increase the value of the 'concrete experience' (Dewey, 1938; Priest & Gass, 2005) in developing this crucial skill. Thus, for example, Tovey (2007) highlights the need for reflective practice when learning about risk and judgement. In similar fashion, Priest's (1990) judgement paradigm explicitly addresses the development of judgement skills as an experiential cycle. In turn, this mental model of learning will be reflected within the coach's own practice perhaps leading to a greater use of experiential pedagogic approaches. This factor is clearly deserving of more examination; nonetheless, it represents another distinction between adventure and traditional sports coaching while suggesting a link with broader educative practice.

### **Delineation by role—shared competencies and discrete skills**

Complexities in defining the role of an adventure-sports coach have led us to the conclusion that this is not a stand-alone role. The adventure-sport coach's role operates in conjunction with the roles of guide and teacher. The adventure-sports coach needs to draw on some skills that are unique and some that are shared. This enables the adventure-sports coach to take a role that may, outwardly, appear as guiding, teaching or coaching. This suggests that a definition of the adventure-sports coach role will be complex and broad.

Considering the position of coach in relation to the positions of teacher and

guide may enable us to conceptualize the position of adventure-sports coaching activity in the broader context of adventure and to clarify the definition. Considering leadership, teaching and coaching as being closely related and sharing common skills, technical, tactical and pedagogical (as illustrated in Figure 1), enables us to conceptualize a position for the ‘new kid on the block’; that of sharing competencies, having a discrete skill set—the interactions of these components leading to the specialist role and function for the adventure-sports coach.

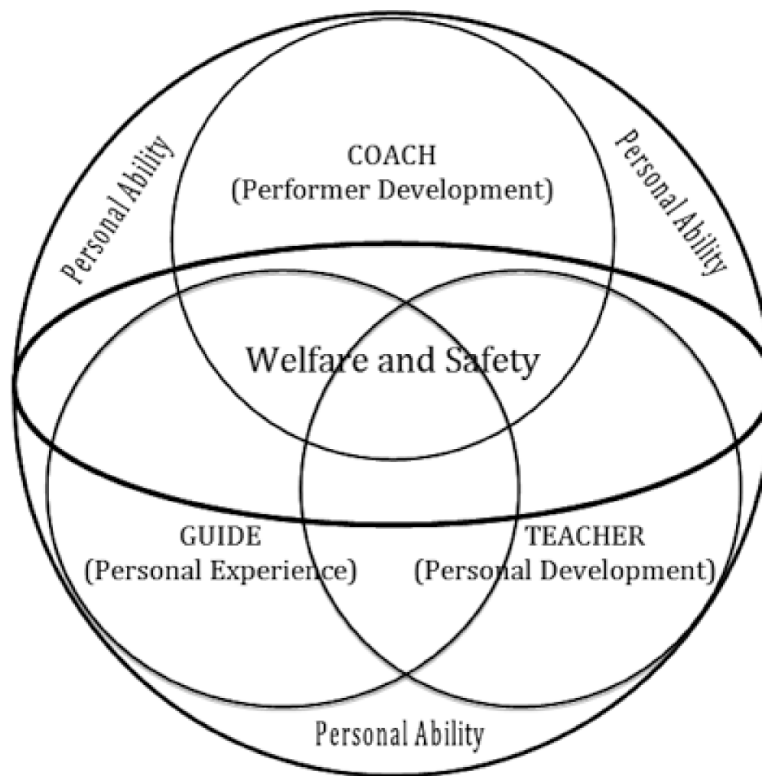


Figure 1. Contextualizing the adventure-sports coach.

Figure 1 proposes a starting point for contextualizing the adventure-sports coach. The model is envisaged in three dimensions, with Welfare and Safety as an overarching factor and with an underpinning of personal ability.

As previously stated, the three circles represent the three major professional areas of adventure activity:

- The GUIDE is focused on taking others into adventurous settings, offering them a desirable PERSONAL EXPERIENCE for their own, sometimes unstated purposes.
- The COACH aims to develop PERFORMERS, learning technical skills, advice on better techniques, planning, etc.
- The TEACHER uses the outdoors as a vector for PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT; sometimes at school, as part of a youth group or even through management development.

Each of these purposes, and the professions which support them, will need a discrete set of skills, although significant overlaps will be apparent to address the participants' reasons and motivations for participation. ALL will need a complete grasp of WELFARE AND SAFETY to go with their specialist professional skill set underpinned by a PERSONAL ABILITY in the activity.

The various interactions between the components illustrate the complex nature of work in this context. The outer limits of the diagram relate to roles with a single dimension—for example a guide in leadership, a therapist or personal development specialist in teaching and a coach (as performance enhancer in a traditional sports sense) in coaching, each of these roles holding clearly definable and delineated positions. Unfortunately for the purposes of this paper, however, the reality is that comparatively few sit easily in such narrow definitions. Many professionals working in the outdoors inhabit the areas of overlap/interaction between coaches and leadership; leadership and teaching; teaching and coaching; and teaching leadership and coaching. Indeed, many morph from sector to sector, changing footprint

depending on a variety of factors including role, deployment, venue, environment, student motivations and safety implications. It is the explicit interaction of these components that defines the role of the outdoor professional, reflects the specific context in which they work and enables them to adapt their professional behaviours throughout the coaching relationship.

### **Catering for interaction—where things get REALLY tricky!**

As highlighted earlier, the adventure-sports coach needs to be independently skillful in the environment. This underpinning essential, personal ability in the field, will not suffice on its own, however. Personal ability does not, in itself, ensure safety (indeed the opposite may apply) and the complex nature of judgement decisions in this field necessitates the need for an overarching consideration with regard to safety. In the outdoors, we contend that exceptional standards of performance are not required and do not automatically equate to exceptional coaching (or teaching or leading) skill, despite widely held anecdotal beliefs. This recognition holds significant implications for the training of professionals in all three outdoor domains. In the current environment, the technical skills required to ensure safety and manage risk are addressed in almost all accreditation schemes. Unfortunately, however, the explicit interactions between ability, leadership, technical coaching and personal development, best defined in the term ‘professional judgement’, are rarely explicitly addressed or evaluated. For this reason, in Figure 1 the overarching issues of decision-making, judgement skills, specific intelligence and risk management should be considered as the ‘component parts’ of the Welfare and Safety construct. In short, this is the mechanism through which this construct acts as super-ordinate over the others for effective professional practice.

Notably, the interaction of the leadership, teaching and coaching domains is

not technically or IQ based. This interaction may be characterized by high degrees of specific types of intelligence and ability to empathize with both individual and group needs in order to set goals that support learning (body smart, people smart, self smart, nature smart) (Gardener, 1983; Golman, 1995; Hyashi, 2005; Hyashi & Ewert, 2006; Sternberg, 2003). One could surmise that adventure-sports coaches will require high and specific types of intelligences to risk-assess, comparing risk and benefit in order to exploit the risk in an effective manner. Such areas also clearly warrant further study while representing other features of the adventure-sports coach skill set.

## **Conclusion**

Adventure-sports coaching is a broad-ranging, complex field, which utilizes concepts and skills associated with leadership and teaching in the outdoors. These professionals also have a unique need to combine risk exploitation and personal performance, aspects drawn from the teaching and guiding domains. This interaction creates the complexity which reflects a diverse range of client aspirations and motivations. Contextualizing the position of coaching in adventure sports highlights the cross-domain nature of the skills required. Adventure-sports coaches need to be leaders, teachers and coaches to fulfil their role. Climbing, paddling and skiing coaches will always exist with a primary focus on skill acquisition, reflecting a skill set more akin to traditional sports coaches. Adventure-sports coaches coach people to undertake adventure activities as the mechanism for their own adventure. The highly personalized nature of adventure and the related perceptions of and response to risk are factors that are specific to the role. We suggest that to operate in and utilize the challenging environments that characterize adventure sports they are required to have a skilful technical performance, to have skilled coaching, leadership and developmental skills if they are to exploit the risks that characterize these

environments. The adventure-sports coach is coach, captain and manager all while playing in the game. The case for delineation of adventure-sports coaches as a specific group within generic sports coaching seems clear.

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## Notes

1. For the purpose of this paper adventure sports are considered to be physical activities with a degree of risk, that are non-competitive in origin and guided by their own ethics such as rock climbing, mountaineering, sea kayaking, white water kayaking, canoeing and caving. These sports are characterized by requiring specific technical skills, possessing an element of physical challenge and a continually changing dynamic environment.
2. Coaching as a whole fails to clearly define itself (Stober & Grant, 2006).
3. However, as Breakwell (2007, p. 77) states, this relationship is 'not at all simple'. It may be a simplistic if widely held belief.