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

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24 Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

74 2012; Cushion et al., 2010) or indeed, on what aspects they should reflect (Abraham &
75 Collins, 2011). As a result, Cropley and Hanton (2011) question whether the domain of
76 sports coaching has simply “jumped on the bandwagon” of reflection, without properly
77 considering and understanding the concept, and how it might be best implemented.

78 Within the literature, reflection is frequently depicted in a hierarchical representation
79 of distinct levels or stages of reflection, ranging from shallow description at one end to
80 critical reflection at the other (e.g., Day, 1993; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Sen & Ford, 2009).
81 Crucially, it is the notion of critical reflection which is espoused as being the most
82 empowering and transformational in nature, allowing individuals to become more responsible
83 for their actions and providing a basis for practice that is ultimately emancipatory (Black &
84 Plowright, 2010; Saylor, 1990; Sen & Ford, 2009; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Critical
85 reflection involves “looking beneath the surface” of a situation in order to identify and
86 critique any assumptions that are being made, as well as challenge the values and beliefs that
87 are being drawn upon (Mezirow, 1990; Saylor, 1990). Indeed, Thompson and Thompson
88 (2008) highlight the importance of such critical “depth” in effectual reflective practice.
89 However, they also stress the need for critical “breadth”; that is, the adoption of a wider lens
90 in order to raise awareness of, and reduce susceptibility to, what Billet and Somerville (2004)
91 term the “social press.” Explicitly, this includes the historical, social, cultural, and
92 institutional factors that influence and shape behavior (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2002). As
93 such, critically reflective coaches should be able to apply reflective processes that go beyond
94 the descriptive and harness the “why” and “what for” of coaching practice. For example, we
95 would expect them to (a) provide a critique of an incident or issue, not merely a description
96 of what happened (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998); (b) step back and adopt a questioning approach
97 when evaluating their experiences in order to understand “why” they coach the way they do
98 (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

124 users to refer back to earlier entries. In addition to straight text and hyperlinks, blogs can also
125 incorporate other forms of media, such as images, audio, and video (Duffy & Bruns, 2006).
126 As a result, a blog is said to be learner centered and full of authenticity, liveliness, and
127 accountability (Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011). It has also been reported that blogs require no
128 additional technical knowledge than that needed for basic word processing (Cold, 2006), that
129 they are motivating learning activities in themselves (Pinkman, 2005), and that they promote
130 greater ownership of content than paper-based journals (Downes, 2004; Godwin-Jones,
131 2003).

132 Furthermore, and perhaps more interestingly, one notable promise of “blogging” is
133 that it promotes multi-layered social interaction and interpersonal communication by
134 enabling readers to comment on blog entries. That is, readers can provide feedback on the
135 ideas presented, as well as “prompt” further reflection and thought regarding a stated
136 viewpoint or opinion (Duffy & Bruns, 2006; Top, Yukselturk, & Inan, 2010). Similarly, a
137 number of authors have suggested that blogs provide the perfect platform for collaborative
138 learning and reflective conversation (Freeman & Brett, 2012; Garrison & Akyol, 2009;
139 Godwin-Jones, 2003). That is, students build knowledge together as they are responsible for
140 one another's learning as well as their own (Dooly, 2008). Consequently, blogs are said to
141 have the capacity to develop into effective online or “virtual” communities of practice (Hall,
142 2008; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) defined
143 “communities of practice” as a group of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a
144 passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by
145 interacting on an ongoing basis” (p.4). In a CoP, each member is said to actively engage with
146 other members of the community (mutual engagement), actively share information and assist
147 each other to pursue the jointly agreed goal (joint enterprise), and share the routines, gestures,

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

150 Moreover, shifting reflective journaling to an online medium such as a blog is said to
151 allow for “students” to have richer and more meaningful interaction with their tutors (Wolf,
152 2010). Tutors can observe and identify students’ learning experiences, struggles, and
153 discomforts in order to make necessary accommodations during instructional activities
154 (Yang, 2009). Alongside this, they can assess the validity of the knowledge being generated
155 during the reflective process. Comments on blog posts can then be used to provide frequent
156 support in developing reflective skills as part of a formative process by accessing the blog
157 entries and sharing their expertise with the individual (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). Crucially,
158 blogs could therefore act as a platform to help coach educators direct and support experiential
159 learning (Culver & Trudel, 2006) and provide coaches with the structures, issues, knowledge,
160 and information they should reflect against, in order for their reflection to be sufficiently
161 critical. As such, the tutor’s availability as an experienced dialogical other with which to
162 “do” reflection (Cushion, 2006) echoes Vygotsky’s (1978) contention that an individual’s
163 learning may be enhanced through engagement with a more capable other. Indeed, several
164 authors have concluded that the ongoing support and leadership of a dedicated facilitator (i.e.,
165 tutor) is crucial if communities of practice are to work in sports coaching (e.g., Culver &
166 Trudel, 2006; Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009).

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

173 development. It must also be noted that results in other fields often remain informal,
174 unsystematic, and inconclusive (Kim, 2008; Sharma & Xie, 2008). In addition, the general
175 assumption that blogs can facilitate peer and group interaction, and, therefore, encourage the
176 social construction of knowledge, are yet to be supported by empirical findings (Halic, Lee,
177 Paulus, & Spence, 2010). Instead, it seems that the supposed technical advantages and
178 educational application of blogs have preceded evidence of their effectiveness (Halic et al.,
179 2010; Tan, 2006).

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

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

191 **Method**

192 **Participants**

193 The sample in the present study consisted of 26 full-time undergraduate students (6
194 females and 20 males), who made up a module cohort on a Sports Coaching degree program
195 during the 2012/13 academic cycle. The average age of the participants was 20.04 years (SD
196 = 1.34) and the median coaching experience was reported as 2 years, with experience ranging
197 from 1 to 5 years in a range of sports (See Table 1). All participants were concurrently

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

203 **Procedure**

204 The module in question was titled “The Reflective Coach” and was a compulsory
205 component of the second academic year of the degree program. At the same time, students
206 were undertaking five other modules, two of which were compulsory and specifically related
207 to the pedagogy of coaching and professional practice. Their remaining three modules were
208 option choices selected from a suite including sports science and the “ologies” of coaching
209 (e.g., sport psychology etc.), and the development and sociology of sport (e.g., community
210 sport development, talent development pathways etc.). An introductory lecture highlighted
211 the module’s aims, learning outcomes, and assessment procedures. Students were advised
212 that the upkeep of an ongoing reflective blog was a necessary element of assessment (worth
213 60% of final module grade) and were instructed to set up their own blog using the externally
214 hosted blog service of either <https://wordpress.com> or <https://blogger.com>. It was explained
215 that they could customize the web address of their blog, select a design template, and make
216 other layout customizations; as such, it was made clear that the ownership of the blogs lay
217 with the user (Tan, 2006). The second week’s session was split into two. The first half
218 explored the conceptual and practical issues associated with reflective practice. Here, Gilbert
219 and Trudel’s (2001) structured model of experiential learning, which has gained credence in
220 the extant literature (Cushion et al., 2010), was presented as an exemplar framework to guide
221 the reflective process. The second half then focused on reflective blogging; its purpose,
222 process, and pedagogical value. At the end of the session, students were given a reading list

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

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

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

250 **Data Analysis**

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

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

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

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

278 Then, all entries were reread and coded in line with Hatton and Smith's (1995)
279 reflective writing framework, which has been used previously to identify levels of reflection
280 in student writing (Boud & Walker, 1998; Moon, 2006; Whipp, 2003). Hatton and Smith
281 (1995) based this framework on an extensive literature review and refined the categories and
282 definitions it employs over several trials (Rourke & Anderson, 2004). They identify four
283 types of writing: unreflective descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection,
284 and critical reflection. To support reliability when coding, Hatton and Smith (1995) provide
285 detailed guidance for using the framework, including specific examples for each of the four
286 categories (Poom-Valickis & Mathews, 2013). They also advise that within a single unit of
287 writing (i.e., a blog post) students may employ a lower level of reflection in order to then
288 progress to a higher level of reflective writing. As a result, each blog post was coded
289 according to the highest level of reflection reached within that entry (Freeman & Brett,
290 2012). Again, on the very few occasions (three) where minor coding discrepancies emerged
291 between the two authors, negotiation was pursued until a consensus of opinion was reached.

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

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

300 **Results**

301 A total of 448 blog entries were analysed (217 in semester one, 231 in semester two),
302 including 433 written posts and 15 containing speech based audio which were transcribed
303 verbatim and coded. The total number of blog entries made by each student ranged from 10
304 to 31 ($M = 17.23$, $SD = 4.51$), with written posts ranging from a minimum of 81 to a
305 maximum of 2481 words in length ($M = 518.35$, $Mdn = 428$, $SD = 323.65$), and audio posts
306 ranging from a minimum of 46 seconds to a maximum of 204 seconds ($M = 100.87$, $Mdn =$
307 76 , $SD = 54.01$). The focus of students' blog posts varied. Table 2 shows that students' own
308 coaching practice was the most frequent topic, followed by self-awareness of their own skills
309 and knowledge, and posts relating to the theories of coaching taught on the course. The least
310 frequent topic was the process of blogging itself. The findings of the present study are now
311 arranged by the three research questions presented earlier in this paper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

396 Similarly, several students made regular reference to their peer's blogs within their
397 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

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

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

433 **Discussion**

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

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

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

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

452 It has been suggested that coaches find it difficult to engage in effective reflection
453 unless they have the underpinning theoretical knowledge the reflective process requires (Peel,
454 Cropley, Hanton, & Fleming, 2013). As such, we recognize that whilst the participants in the
455 present study were given instructional guidance on how to reflect on their coaching practice
456 using blogs, with Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) structured model of experiential learning
457 presented as a potential framework to guide the reflective process, this could have been
458 insufficient to allow them to develop their understanding of the purposes and process of
459 reflective practice. That is, although the introductory lectures in the present study provided
460 participants with a structure to guide the mechanics of reflection, the actual reflective process
461 of issue setting, unpacking, and solving was not operationalized fully (Abraham & Collins,
462 2011). For example, participants were not encouraged to critically examine and analyze their
463 role frames in order to identify and/or reduce potential biases that might otherwise have
464 guided or influenced their behavior (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Equally, whilst having sports
465 coaches reflect on their day-to-day learning experiences in their own coaching context is
466 important (Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009), we recognize that by specifically asking
467 participants in the present study to focus on "critical incidents" during their experiential
468 learning, they may have been overly concerned with identifying or focusing on negative
469 aspects, or perceived "problems" within their coaching practice (Dixon, Lee, & Ghaye,
470 2013). In this regard, Smith and Jack (2005) suggest that individuals may "search" for
471 problems on uneventful days in order to tick the assessment box, whilst Dixon et al. (2013)

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

474 Clearly then, if we are to utilize blogs to facilitate reflection in coach education, we
475 may first need to put more explicit processes and strategies in place to both encourage
476 participation and guide coaches toward higher levels of reflection (Peel et al., 2013). Indeed,
477 the absence of sufficient structures to support reflective practice has been cited as an inhibitor
478 of enhanced reflection in previous research (Larrivee, 2008; Otienoh, 2009), with Knowles,
479 Borrie, and Telfer (2005) finding that none of the coach education programmes they
480 examined contained processes to overtly nurture reflective skills. Accordingly, Gilbert and
481 Trudel (2013) suggest that support devices such as reflection cards and critical reflection
482 exercises might help coaches to reflect more critically on their learning. Similarly, it has
483 been suggested that detailed rubrics or matrixes of descriptors characterizing reflections
484 might promote the development of critical reflection (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005; Larrivee,
485 2008), whilst structured blogging “tasks” (e.g., instructor prescribed topics), have been said
486 to lead to more focused and specific blogging without detracting from the personalized nature
487 of content (Robertson, 2011). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the development
488 of reflective capacity is a complex process requiring time, effort and practice in order for it to
489 be “learned” (Gelter, 2003; Knowles et al., 2001). Consequently, it must be noted that
490 although the present study required participants to reflect using their blog for a period of 26
491 weeks, this timeframe might still be insufficient to engender familiarity with, and
492 commitment to, the medium of blogging and the development of critically reflective skills
493 (Cropley et al., 2012).

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

496 The “social” influence of the blogging process was another factor which may require
497 explicit development. Despite several researchers (e.g., Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Hall,
498 2008; Hara & Hew, 2007; Yang, 2009) reporting that blogs have the capacity to promote
499 social interaction and the development of virtual learning communities, and a significant
500 body of research suggesting that coaches learn through their social interactions with others
501 (e.g., Culver & Trudel, 2006; Erickson, Bruner, Macdonald, & Côté, 2008), the present study
502 found that participants did not take advantage of the collaborative and peer discourse features
503 of blogs. Although students had direct access to peers’ blogs (Wenger, 1998), and it was
504 apparent that many of them made the effort to regularly read their peers’ blog posts, overt
505 dialogue and “reflective conversation” (Cropley et al., 2012) in the form of comments was
506 conspicuous in its absence. As such, it is clear that a community of practice was not an
507 automatic consequence of the availability of a collaborative tool in the present study (Chan &
508 Ridgway, 2006). This finding echoes the assertions of other researchers who have reported
509 that participants can often find it difficult to “make the step” toward a stronger sense of
510 community in an online environment (e.g., Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Similarly, more
511 dedicated “offline” studies have struggled to get coaches to interact with their peers and
512 engage in the joint enterprise that characterizes a functioning CoP (Culver & Trudel, 2006,
513 Culver et al., 2009; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004). For example, Gilbert and Trudel (2005) suggest
514 that, whilst having access to peer sounding boards is vital, the mere availability of peers is
515 not enough. Furthermore, those peers must also be respected and trusted for their knowledge
516 of coaching before coaches will seek their counsel. Crucially however, Mallett, Rossi, and
517 Tinning (2007) propose that the mutual trust and respect required to encourage social
518 interaction between coaches can take many years to develop, something that the participants
519 in the present study had not had. In addition, Lemyre et al. (2007) propose that facilitative
520 peer interaction between coaches is never inevitable, as the “tradition” in coaching is not for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

573 Such issues notwithstanding, the tutor was able to offer guidance on what elements of
574 a coaching issue need to be attended to, suggest what additional knowledge might be
575 required, and propose strategies that the coach might use to address the issue (Abraham &
576 Collins, 2011). Significantly, existing research has emphasized the importance of this type of
577 intervention if reflection is to move beyond the basic level of description (Churchill, 2009).
578 For example, significant empirical support has emerged for the scaffolding of reflection
579 through appropriate questioning from a mentor or more capable other (e.g., Reingold et al.,
580 2008; Vygotsky, 1978; Whipp, 2003).

581 However, in retrospect, the tutor recognized that his questioning comments could
582 have been in and of themselves more critical in order to draw out and encourage higher levels
583 of reflective thinking in the students. For example, when commenting on blog posts, the
584 tutor tended to encourage students to become more aware of their behaviors and develop a
585 rationale for their behavior by utilizing “why?” and “what if?” questions (Cushion et al.,
586 2003; Lyle, 2002). Yet, he rarely prompted students to be more aware of their role frames
587 (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004) and the values and beliefs that might underpin their behavior in a
588 particular situation (Jones et al., 2002). Moreover, little reference was made to the social and
589 cultural context of students’ practice, all factors inherent within critical reflection. This is
590 particularly important, if, for example, we consider the social environment in which a coach
591 works. This environment is extremely complex, and coaches are faced with a diverse range
592 of influences, which pressure them to behave in certain ways in order to conform and secure
593 approval (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Collins, Abraham, & Collins, 2012; Stoszowski & Collins,
594 2012). Consequently, the subtleties of this environment can promote and perpetuate the
595 value and acceptance of certain types of knowledge and behaviour over others (Cushion et

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

605 **Conclusion**

606 Generally, results indicate that blogs hold the potential to facilitate reflection in
607 coaches; however, in the present study they did not facilitate overt collaborative learning and
608 the emergence of a community of practice. Nevertheless, we believe enough promise exists
609 to warrant further investigation of their potential in coach education pedagogy (Morgan et al.,
610 2013), particularly in utilizing group blogs to provide coaches with the opportunity to
611 enhance critical thinking skills by engaging in peer dialogue and collaborative reflection
612 (Culver & Trudel, 2006; Dixon et al., 2013; Manouchehri, 2002). Promisingly, given that a
613 recent four-year coach tracking study found that the cost, timing, and travel involved in
614 accessing coach education are major barriers to uptake (Sports Coach UK, 2012b), it seems
615 Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs could allow coach educators to provide ongoing support to
616 those coaches undertaking certification courses at relatively little monetary and "time"
617 expense to both parties when compared to face-to-face solutions (Piggott, 2013).

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

621 utilized a sample of undergraduate students in order to increase the level of “experimental
622 control” over the process, as well as the homogeneity of participants, some readers may be
623 concerned that participants lacked autonomy during the reflective process and that, as a
624 result, engagement in the blogging process was mixed. We suggest the engagement levels in
625 the present study were less a case of perceived student autonomy and more a case of some
626 being more committed to learning than others, however, the findings clearly need extension
627 and, if results so indicate, confirmation into “mainstream” coaching. Indeed, Gallimore et al.
628 (2013) make clear there is a need to determine whether guided reflection initiatives can
629 endure beyond concept studies into wide scale implementation in sports coaching. Similarly,
630 there is a need to test whether the reflective skills evidenced during the blogging process
631 endure outside the constraints of a structured and assessed module (Knowles et al., 2006).
632 Indeed, Hobbs (2007) even questions whether or not reflective practice can, in fact, be a
633 required component of a course and still retain validity as genuine reflection. Additionally,
634 there is also a need for better insight into coaches’ perception and satisfaction relating to blog
635 use for reflection and social interaction (Kim, 2008). We intend to pursue these lines in both
636 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%)

For Peer Review