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Beyond ‘crude pragmatism’ in sports coaching: Insights from C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey: A commentary

Andrew Cruickshank and Dave Collins

Introduction

Reflecting the use of a pragmatic philosophy in our own research and work in sport, we were pleased to see this branch of philosophy given further exposure in Jenkins’ stimulus paper. Indeed, such coverage is timely given Cushion and Partington’s¹ recent points on an insufficiently critical treatment of philosophy in coaching literature. Although we do not agree with a number of specific points raised by these authors, and others in Jenkins’ stimulus article, we do agree with the general premise that coaching philosophy has often been treated in a superficial fashion. We also agree on the need to reinforce that coaching philosophy is a multidimensional construct and, as stressed by Jenkins, that the ‘pragmatism’ referred to by coaches and researchers is largely crude and detached from the actual philosophical tradition. However, to further the discussion in Jenkins’ stimulus article, we feel that a greater focus on *how* pragmatism would and should be used by coaches is needed if academic discussion is to be optimally relevant to practice. In this respect, we don’t see pragmatism as a primary route for guiding or changing ‘day-to-day ideologies’ (e.g. the way to treat others). We also don’t see pragmatism as a primary route for coaches to transform deep-held beliefs on their practice; while clearly biased, we see the ‘epistemological chain’ as a more direct route for progress in this aspect of philosophy given the explicit links that it makes (or, at least, should make) between a coach’s beliefs on the origins, nature, and use of knowledge and their actual practice.² In short, when properly employed and thought through, the epistemological chain can help coaches to critically explore their beliefs on what knowledge *is*, whereas pragmatism is a philosophy on *how* to create and refine this knowledge for oneself. In this manner, we would suggest that pragmatism can guide a *part of* rather than the whole coaching process. While no means comprehensive, the rest of our commentary therefore aims to build on the general points in Jenkins’ article and outline what a pragmatic

coach would look like against this specific ‘knowledge perspective’.

The pragmatic coach

As more and more coaches progress through formal higher education and coaching becomes more professionalised, it seems fair to say that the scientist–practitioner model is becoming increasingly prominent in coaching settings. Indeed, while good coaching has always reflected this model, coaches are increasingly expected to justify their practice against theoretically sound and rigorously developed evidence (although we would suggest neither fast nor coherently enough!). Regardless, surviving and thriving in the long term is, among other things, therefore dependent on the knowledge at the coach’s disposal, together with the way in which that knowledge is tested, tweaked and refined. This knowledge can be acquired externally; for example, through educators, peers, and literature. However, if sports wish to provide sophisticated, forward-thinking, and creative coaching then this knowledge should also clearly be generated internally by the coach,³ either as a novel creation or, perhaps more usually, by tweaking ideas gleaned from others – as per the social perspective stressed by Cushion and Partington and others.⁴ In this respect, pragmatism can offer a lens for the generation and/or refinement of knowledge that is focused on optimal returns for practice.

Reinforcing and building upon points made by Jenkins, pragmatism is grounded in the notion that the value of new knowledge is determined by the difference that it makes to actual practice.⁵ This knowledge

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should also help coaches to understand what works in their context rather than the coaching world in general, providing them with the tools and approach to contextualise knowledge gleaned elsewhere. Accordingly, the pragmatic coach will see knowledge as provisional at all times and requiring continual updating and upgrading as contexts evolve.⁶ Furthermore, and in contrast to Cushion and Partington's¹ apparent prioritisation of philosophical over practical matters, a pragmatic coach would not see philosophical insight as *automatically* more relevant than acting on common sense or intuition; instead, knowledge is considered a web in which the value of *any* insight lies in its *use* for addressing applied challenges.^{7,8} As such, the value of having, for example, a well-defined ontological standpoint depends on its value for the specific coach and their context; this certainly shouldn't be a requisite for *all* coaches; just as it shouldn't be a requisite for all doctors.

Returning to our characterisation, how would a pragmatic coach therefore approach a challenge that requires new knowledge? As an example, take a coach looking to improve the preparation of their team for away games after poor results the previous season. Adhering to pragmatic principles, the coach is concerned with understanding a *process* that will help them to address an applied issue.⁶ To find out 'what does good preparation for our away games involve?', the coach also adheres to the use of diverse samples and mixed methods which can best answer the question.^{5,9} regarding the former, s/he embraces the existence of multiple realities and sources the opinions of players and staff who have been with the team for a number of years, and those who have just joined; regarding the latter, qualitative data are also compared and contrasted with performance data that provide insight on the extent to which behavioural markers have varied across different away matches last season (e.g. in relation to when individuals felt that pre-game preparation had been better or worse). In short, the pragmatic coach would be an arch experimenter (cf. Schön's perspective on the need for practitioners to proactively test and trial different options),¹⁰ albeit that this experimentation may not always be executed in a directly formal sense. Importantly, the data collection process would be iterative (with developing answers checked and challenged against further data) and the coach would also recognise their own role in the construction of this new knowledge. Indeed, when paired with self-awareness and reflection, their own experiences can lead to considered innovation rather than a problematic bias.⁷ Through appropriate analyses, the product of the coach's assessment is then developed; in this case, a set of principles for preparing the team for future away fixtures. In line with pragmatic tenets, the validity of these

principles is then gauged against levels of community agreement (i.e. do others perceive the principles to be relevant and useful?) with evaluation then focused on the difference that they made to the team (i.e. what difference did they actually make to preparation and performance?).^{5,7,11}

Conclusion

In sum, and in accord with Jenkins, there is much more to the *legitimately pragmatic* coach than someone with a 'self-referenced anecdotal approach to practice based on "what works," and a way of coaching that "gets results"' (Cushion and Partington,¹ p. 857). Additionally, we also feel that there is much more to be done in terms of incorporating this philosophy into coaching practice, as well as in research that aspires to make a practical difference to the field. Our recent focus on expertise rather than competency as the best basis for coach accreditation matches these ideas: a constant and considered use of the 'it depends' philosophy over a simple 'do it this way' approach.¹² Indeed, with a focus on 'gold standard thinking' over 'gold standard behaviours' (a focus which is, at best, reversed in competency-oriented programmes – behaviours are more often just acceptable!), an expertise-oriented programme would place greatest emphasis on a coach's ability to think through the pros and cons of different ways to create and refine their knowledge (as per the tenets of pragmatism) rather than the ability to follow 'best or acceptable practice' procedures. Just for clarity, the lack of contextual variation in competency based systems makes it almost inevitable that behaviours are usually suboptimal. In this vein, we hope that our commentary supports the progression of pragmatism as *the* route for generating, testing and tweaking knowledge in applied coaching domains as, for us at least, this lens can solve many of the issues that have plagued coaching practice (it's not evidence-based enough) and coaching research (it's not applied enough) to date.

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