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# **Mentoring as a formalized learning strategy with community sports volunteers**

## **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to examine formalised mentoring as a learning strategy for volunteer sports coaches and to consider implications for other volunteer groups in the community. Despite the increasingly popular use of mentoring as a learning and support strategy across professional domains, and the sheer scale of volunteer sports coach activity in many communities, there has been comparatively little research on structured mentoring programmes in such settings. Data are reported from a 12 month longitudinal study of 6 mentors and 18 volunteer coaches who were organized into formal mentor partnerships in one region of the UK. Findings from the study revealed that mentoring was the result of continuous interaction between coach and context, and that context must be understood in both spatial and temporal terms. The implications for mentoring in other community based volunteer groups are explored.

## **Introduction**

“I had wanted to improve my coaching because I felt limited, and I did feel that there was more going on than I really understood. My motivation for going on the program [mentoring] was really to improve myself so that I could maybe understand that” (Simon – volunteer coach).

In this paper, we report findings from a 12-month study in which we examined the effectiveness of formalized mentoring as a learning strategy used with volunteer youth sports coaches. A focus on professional learning for youth sport coaches, particularly volunteers based in the community, reflects a growing interest in the societal role of this vast volunteer workforce. It is estimated that in the United States, 20 million youths participate in sports each year, and the role of volunteer coaches is essential in providing positive sports experiences (Busser & Carruthers, 2010). In the United Kingdom, the volunteer coaching workforce is made up of 750, 000 coaches who ‘guide’ the sports experience of over 8 million individuals each week (North, 2009). In Canada, survey data from the General Social Survey (1992-2005) reported that 51% of Canadian children (5-14years old) had regularly taken part in organized sport (outside the school curriculum) during the previous 12 months (Clark, 2008). These examples suggest that organized youth sport, based in the community, is an important part of

many individuals' lives; and that importantly, enthusiastic, skilful and professionally trained sports coaches are fundamental to the provision of positive sport experiences that can meet the diverse learning needs of children and young people. However, in the context of volunteerism, this is a challenge. Research on the development of volunteer coaches includes a process that is complex and multifaceted, and where training is characterized by provisional and individual learning pathways (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Yet effective training and support for volunteer coaches would seem to be critical, particularly where their role in facilitating positive sports environments is clearly acknowledged. It must be pointed out that education for elite level sport performance coaches is somewhat different and is not covered in this paper; instead in this paper, we focus on the much bigger mass sport participation field.

A regional organization in the United Kingdom (Community Sports Partnership - CSP) was keen to develop a mentoring program to support some of its lead volunteer youth sport coaches. A group of coaches was identified for development because they had contributed significantly to the coaching programs of the CSP (e.g. had led representative youth sports teams). Key personnel within the CSP had a broad understanding of mentoring in terms of supporting novice coaches' practice but, during the planning process, it became apparent that they had little awareness of the complexities of learning. Indeed, looking back, it could be argued that although the coach mentoring program was built on much goodwill and enthusiasm, its design, organization and delivery were based on little more than intuition and anecdotal evidence. Although it has been argued that coaching research has not always kept up with the accelerated pace of coach education policy and funding in many Western countries (Cassidy & Rossi, 2006), the literature has begun to include how both researchers and policy makers might improve the effectiveness of programs designed to improve the quality of volunteer coaching. In particular, new views on learning, have led to new views on coach education and, in particular, the ways in which individuals construct knowledge, activities and skills outside formal education and training (Cassidy & Rossi, 2006). A case in point is that of mentoring, which continues to be prominent and popular as a learning strategy in the professional development of community based volunteer sports coaches.

In examining mentoring as a learning strategy, we draw extensively from the socio-cultural literature. From this perspective, learning occurs through social interactions within a particular cultural setting, and is characterized by three interrelated processes: social activity, independent practice and contextualised problem

solving. In other words, learning is very much an embodied and social practice. The value of such an approach is to bridge what Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008) observe as the troubling dualisms of contemporary learning literature; where learning situations are examined from either the perspective of the individual or the context (e.g. agency-structure, cognitive-social, acquisition-participation). In the context of mentoring, a theory of cultural learning serves to recognise learning as a consequence of participants' embodied engagement in mentoring practices and actions, shaped by the culture in which such practices are situated. In drawing on a socio-cultural lens, we, as others have done (e.g., Colley, 2003), take much from the social theories proposed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). The appeal of Bourdieu's work lies in his focus on the interactions between agency and structure, and how these interactions are acted upon in the social arena. Of particular interest is the way in which Bourdieu identified a number of interdependent concepts, or thinking tools which we found useful in examining mentoring with volunteers; specifically, notions of field and habitus.

A narrow view of learning, and one that has traditionally dominated coach education globally, locates learning firmly and almost exclusively within educational institutions and formal settings (Jones, 2006). However, current research in professional development has begun to broaden conceptions of learning contexts and situations, resulting in an emerging body of research that considers workplace/work based activities as valuable sites of professional learning (Billet, 2006). It is through making sense of everyday workplace encounters and activities that learners begin to remake practice (Billet, 2006). As Rynne, Mallett and Tinning (2010) pointed out, learning is more than a process of internalisation and socialisation; learning is an interpretive process of knowledge construction. It could be argued that re-conceptualising the context of the learning environment in this way provides opportunities for organizations to embrace lifelong learning or life-wide learning (Cheallaigh, 2001), capturing both formal and informal learning settings. It is important to point out that the focus of this study was grounded in mentoring interactions outside of formal education; specifically, mentoring situated in the sports club and mediated by a regional sports organization.

In this study, we sought to examine the process of volunteer coach learning through a formalized mentoring program. Specifically, the research question was: what is the role of formalized mentoring in developing volunteer coaches' learning? In addressing this question, the study contributes to the mentoring literature since it demonstrates how the concepts of agency, structure, and culture are inextricably linked to the

application of mentoring as a learning tool with volunteer coaches. Further, we also identified implications for mentoring in community-based volunteer groups, particularly where volunteers are increasingly recognized as significant enablers in shaping and influencing the experiences of young people.

The paper is organized into the following sections. First, we draw on the sports coaching literature in order to reconceptualise coaching practice and consider the implications of this for coach education. We then provide a summary of literature pertinent to mentoring, informal learning, and situated learning in professional development. An overview of the program evaluated is then described, followed by reporting of data on the mentoring experiences of participants. The discussion and conclusion consider the implications of formalized mentoring as a learning strategy with volunteer coaches and other similar volunteer workers in the community.

### **Sports Coaching as a Community-Based Volunteer Activity**

There is some research evidence to support the claims made for the potential of sport participation to make a positive impact on participants' physical, mental and social health (Atherley, 2006; Coalter, 2000). For example, at a community level, evidence suggests that sport can play a significant part in facilitating community bonds, reducing crime rates and providing positive role models/mentors (Nathan, 2010). There is less evidence, however, to suggest that volunteer sports coaches can deliver the kind of sports participation legacy, with attendant community benefits, that have been claimed. Thus, although volunteer sports coaches are characterized as significant enablers of sports participation experiences for adults and youths within a community, there has been very little research into their motivation, retention and recruitment. In one of the few studies that focuses specifically on volunteer sports coaches, Busser and Carruthers (2010) concluded that the majority of US volunteer coaches are co-producers; in other words, coaches engage in coaching because they have a child interested in that sport. These findings reflect similar UK coaching demographics where youth sports coaches tend to drop out of the coaching role when their children withdraw from the sport (North, 2009). As a result, experienced, well-trained and knowledgeable coaches are lost to the sporting system. It could be argued, therefore, that if sustained engagement is valued, organizations need to consider supporting volunteer coaches in terms of personal development and personal growth opportunities. This is, however, a complex issue and demanding to deliver in practice.

Traditional approaches to coach development have been firmly entrenched in formal structures of education (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). The content of formal education for coaches has traditionally drawn from bio-scientific discourses (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2004), and sport coaches have tended to be perceived as mere technicians, who can transfer coaching knowledge to learners in a linear and unproblematic way (Macdonald & Tinning, 1995). Unsurprisingly, coach education and CPD programs have mirrored this conception of learning as acquisition (Sfard, 1998), and have been organized around the delivery of discrete units, focusing on specific and narrow aspects of disciplinary knowledge (e.g. physiology, psychology). The outcome of this approach has been that coach education, historically, has delivered coaching knowledge in ways that are de-contextualised from the complex and messy realities of the coaching environment (Jones & Wallace, 2005). As a result, coach development programs have been accused of failing to offer any real value or relevance for the practising coach (Gilbert & Trudel, 2006), and this is exacerbated in the case of community-based volunteer programs.

### **Literature Related to Mentoring – A Cultural Learning Approach**

Since the publication of Lave and Wenger's (1991) book, 'Situated Learning', there has been considerable attention paid to learning as a process. Informed by an understanding of society as constituted by dynamic social relationships (Wikely & Bullock, 2006), researchers have examined the meaning and processes of learning grounded in social activity (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005). Indeed, Lave and Wenger (1991) state that their prime motivation was to produce a comprehensive theory of learning as social practice, where "learning is not merely situated in practice; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (p. 35). Refocusing attention on the relationship between learner and context leads to an appreciation of the ways in which learning can be understood as a dynamic process of interpretation, decision-making and perception, as the individual engages with physical, socio-cultural and organizational context (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998).

A review of the mentoring literature reveals many ways in which mentoring functions and processes resonate with current theorising about how individuals learn. Indeed, recent studies have begun to reconceptualise mentoring in terms of multiple, developmental or network mentoring (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Notably, this reconfiguration of mentoring is underpinned by a social approach to learning where individuals construct meaning from their interaction with others. For example, and building on Kram's (1988) seminal work, researchers have found that individuals sometimes actively seek out multiple mentors in fulfilling multiple developmental needs (Scandura & Pelligrini, 2008). As a result, alternative mentoring possibilities, such as network or multiple mentoring, present themselves. The value of thinking about mentoring in this way is that it repositions mentoring as a learning activity that extends beyond the traditional dyadic configuration (though this is still possible). For example, in their study of mentoring for PE teachers, Ayers and Griffins (2005) described mentoring as a series of multiple relationships where mentor(s) created or existed in an environment that encouraged co-participation in a nexus of relationships in order to meet personal and professional needs. This model is also supported by Cawyer, Simonds, and Davis (2002), who described mentoring as, a configuration of relationships based around accessibility in seeking professional and social support. Accordingly, both these studies recognise a more explicit role for the mentee in taking responsibility for learning, and where learning is a process of shared accountability, and the learner as increasingly self directed.

Learning through mentoring is a clear example of learning that is situated in context. Examples from the mentoring literature include Paré and Maistre (2006) and Patton, Pagnano, and Griffin, (2005) who framed mentoring through a situated learning perspective, and positioned it within Community of Practice (CoP) model. A CoP is defined by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) as; "a group of people who share a common concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an on-going basis" (p. 4). Central to COP is a situated perspective on learning, which focuses attention on the integrated relationship between individual, activity and environment; hence knowledge construction is inseparable from relevant contexts and activities. In Paré and Maistre's (2006) study for instance, neophyte's participation in collective activities led to "consciously performed actions that become automated as actions (p. 367). In other words, learning occurred as a process of activity, participation and

cognition. In turn, the ‘changed’ individual then contributed to the practices and culture of the community in a form of “parallel community transformation” (p.367) The implication from these studies of a situated approach to mentoring is that outcomes are a blend of the individual, process and context; hence the researcher is presented with a triad of relationships that must be examined in order to understand learning through mentoring.

Although a situated perspective has proven to be valuable as a tool from which to begin to examine learning, it has been criticized for neglecting the individual at the expense of a focus on context (Fuller *et al.*, 2005). For example, Blaka and Filstad (2007) have questioned the transparency of the learning process in the situated perspective because the *how* and *what* of learning are overlooked. Moreover, while Lave and Wenger (1991) acknowledge that power relations characterise community engagement, they still present CoPs as benign, cohesive and stable structures and, in doing so, it could be argued they fail to address explicitly the unequal power relations and inequalities that inevitably exist between participants. This is a critical point, because understanding power and social relations within any social practice, such as mentoring, is important in understanding the opportunities and barriers to learning. Where both researchers and policy makers are engaged in utilizing mentoring in supporting professional practice, there is a clear need to focus on not only the individual, but the cultural setting and its impact on how mentoring is perceived, actioned and engaged in by participants. From such a view, mentoring engagement is a product of the interrelationship between biography and culture.

In addressing contemporary approaches to learning, recent work has used cultural learning theory as a way of bridging the agency-structure dichotomy. For instance, and grounded in their examination of the learning cultures of Further Education Colleges in the UK (similar to the US Community college system), Hodkinson et al. (2008) argue that learning, “depends on the nature of the learning culture and of the position of the habitus and capitals of the individuals” (p.41) . For Hodkinson et al. (2008) the standard learning metaphors of ‘acquisition’ and ‘transfer’ are problematic because both fail to acknowledge the impact of different learning cultures (e.g. work, community, family, school) on the learner. Subsequently, Hodkinson et al. (2008) advocate drawing on a cultural theory of learning which examines how individuals learn in different situations, and how learning cultures influence the practices, actions and dispositions of individuals. It is important to point out that



throughout this paper, we use Swidler's (1986) definition of culture as "publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning" (p, 273). In the context of mentoring and the organizing culture, symbolic forms of meaning might include beliefs, practices, routines, language and stories. In the context of this study, the learning culture of the CSP offered a frame of reference within which mentoring with volunteer coaches was then viewed, actioned and evaluated by key stakeholders and participants.

In considering means of cultural production, Bourdieu identified three areas of focus; habitus, field and capital. Field and habitus are particularly important in examining mentoring with volunteers. In Bourdieu's work, field may be considered as a set of social relations that characterise particular learning sites (e.g. work, school). Jenkins (2002) helps define Bourdieu's understanding of the concept of field as a, "structured system of social positions – occupied either by individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for the occupants" (p.85). Significantly, fields are defined by shifting and imprecise boundaries (the point at which the field fails to impact on practice), inequality, and are structured in terms of power relations (Jenkins, 2002). Within this social space, individuals perceive the field differently, and interpret capital and value within the field differently. In relation to learning, it is important to appreciate that fields are dynamic and overlapping; and that formal and informal fields interact with each other and are in turn influenced by wider social structures (i.e. class, gender, ethnicity, occupation). Accordingly, Hodkinson et al., (2008) have suggested that seeing fields through the metaphor of a 'force field' captures the imprecise and overlapping boundaries of fields. This is helpful in viewing mentoring as a consequence of the volunteers' interactions with multiple fields of learning.

In Bourdieu's work, habitus is seen as product of cultural socialisation through which individuals perceive, produce and evaluate social practice. Habitus represents the absorptions of certain actions, knowledge and feelings within a social setting (field) and, as described previously, actors (volunteers, mentors) belong to a myriad of fields, each one influencing an individual's habitus. In an attempt to clarify any confusion between habitus and identity, Colley et al. (2003) has observed that; "Habitus is a concept that expresses complexities that are not perhaps so well conveyed by the notion of identity. It incorporates both the subjective, personal dispositions and the collective, structural predispositions shaped by class, race and gender that are combined in each individual" (p.477). Significantly, because habitus is acquired through occupational and personal

experiences within social contexts, habitus is unique to individuals. For the volunteers and mentors in this study, habitus was a way of expressing the reciprocal learning relationships developed between the coach and the mentoring process. It is important to recognise that habitus represents past relationships between the individual and social structures, and therefore can be conceived as located at the subconscious level of cognitive impression (Callaghan 2005). As Bourdieu described, habitus captures the, ‘embodied history, internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). A coach’s habitus in this study was, therefore, critical in shaping how the coach perceived their involvement in mentoring.

In summary, it is evident from the literature that the past decade has seen a shift in conceptual approaches towards mentoring. Traditional notions of mentoring held that relationships were organizationally/job related, hierarchical in structure, formed around a single dyad, and were focused on mentee learning (Higgins, 2000). However, recent studies have begun to illuminate mentoring to be something more: mentoring relationships that are intra and extra-organizational (profession, community, and family), multiple dyads/networks, career/person related and involving mutuality and reciprocity. Such reconsideration begins to perceive mentoring as more of a developmental network, as individuals sometimes look beyond the boundaries of organizations in seeking out professional support and development. As a result, learning through formalized mentoring is not seen solely as the acquisition of knowledge by detached individuals, but as a process of social participation, situated within a cultural context. Consequently, the nature of the learning culture, impacts significantly on the mentoring process. Therefore, to better understand mentoring, the interplay between individual and the social context must be kept in view. A cultural theory of learning offers such a view.

### **Overview of the Project**

In this study, we focussed on volunteer coaches and mentors operating in one region of the UK over a period of one year (2007-2008). The purpose of the study was to examine formalized mentoring as a learning strategy for volunteer sports coaches. Specifically, the research wanted to understand how a group of coaches and mentors engaged in, and made sense of, the mentoring process. It could be argued that gaining a better understanding of mentoring for volunteer coaches is an essential step in the design of effective professional development structures and processes for this large workforce.

The participants for the mentoring scheme were contacted through their regional coaching organization Community Sports Partnership (CSP), which was in the process of establishing a formalized mentoring program for volunteer coaches in the region. Through a combination of open invitations and targeting of key individuals, six mentors and eighteen coaches agreed to take part in the mentoring program. The program was 'formalized' in that mentors and mentees were matched by the CSP, a training program for mentors was provided (3 hour mentoring workshop written by national coaching organization), and a formalized development plan and tracking system were put in place. For instance, at the beginning of the mentoring relationship, transactional exchanges in terms of establishing and negotiating goals, outcomes and expectations were established and negotiated. Mentors and coaches were matched by a professional coach educator working for the CSP, and linked by their sport. All participants in the mentor program agreed to be included in this study.

The CSP formalized mentoring program formed the case investigated in this research. The research was split into three phases and data were collected over a 12 month period. In phase 1, interviews and questionnaires were used to elicit a mentoring baseline from which to measure subsequent progress (e.g. participants' background, their conceptions of mentoring, aspirations for the formalized program). During phase 2, questionnaires and focus groups were used to monitor and generate data from mentoring interactions and mentoring dyads. Phase 3, involved exit interviews and focus groups during which both mentors and mentees were asked to critically evaluate their experiences of the formalized mentoring program. Data were collected in the form of: 25 individual interviews (35 recorded hours), 4 focus groups (8 recorded hours), and 34 completed questionnaires.

### **Characteristics of Participants**

The formalized mentoring program that was purposively sampled in this study was led by David (pseudonym) who worked for a national sports organization but was professionally linked to the CSP. All of the coaches and mentors were volunteer practitioners. Mentors were defined by the CSP as having 5+ years of coaching experience and had reached level 3 (of the 4 level national coaching framework) in their respective sports.

Coaches were defined as having a level 1 / 2 qualification. Six mentors were recruited (4 men, 2 women; mean age 36) and 18 coaches (10 male, 8 women; mean age 26).

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was undertaken using a constructivist revision of the Grounded Theory Method (GTM), recognizing that the emerging analytical process is mutually negotiated between participant and researcher (Charmaz, 2006). We engaged in inductive analysis of data from the start of the study. Transcribed interviews, questionnaires and focus group data were read and a process of labelling or coding events and actions in the text was applied. Coding involved the interpretation of data by labelling segments of data in a way that captured, accounted for, and summarised their properties. As articulated by Charmaz (2006), the coding process used in this study comprised of two broad activities. First, a line by line/ word by word coding process was conducted in which codes were applied to capture meaning. Mindful of a central tenet of GTM: that open codes fit the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), coding with gerunds was used during this phase in order to focus our analysis on identifying processes and action behind the data. For instance, one of our initial codes was coded as 'Relevance', with a clear reference to adult learning theory (Knowles, 1973) and the need for CPD opportunities, for adults, to be relevant to their practice. However, using the code *relevance* failed to portray the active and engaged cognitive processes that participants went through when presented with new information; hence *assessing content as lacking relevance* seemed to be a better fit. Second, and building on this first activity, we engaged in what is called focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) whereby the most frequent codes were selected, conceptualized and elevated in order to identify significant concepts within the data set to create a sense of what was happening. Focused codes represented codes from the initial phase that made the most analytical sense when examining the large amount of data generated. Therefore we engaged in an iterative process whereby data were compared to data, and data compared to codes throughout the study, which gave us the opportunity to refine our constructed focused codes.

In this study, focused codes which appeared to make the most analytical sense of volunteer coaches' experiences of formalized mentoring were: (a) conditions for volunteer coach learning, (b) mentoring as negotiated boundaries, and (c) barriers to formalized mentoring. These focused codes allowed us to condense

the data while providing a handle on them. For instance, participant's engagement with any professional development initiative seemed to be a condition of their intra-professional knowledge (e.g reflective examination of their own practices), reciprocity (e.g identifying opportunities to interact with other coaches), relevance (e.g seeing development that had meaning to practice), and dispositions (e.g coach's habitus influenced what volunteers focused on, what they rejected, and in what they participated). Hence, the focused code, conditions for coach learning, captured an accumulation of processes that shaped coaches' perceptions of coach learning and these perceptions formed the pre-cursor from which decisions to engage or not engage with CPD activities were formed. Similarly the code, mentoring as negotiated boundaries, describes the continuous processes that volunteers and mentors engaged in as they "framed", "clarified", and "negotiated" meaningful mentoring experiences. Finally, barriers to formalized mentoring, was derived from collapsing the initial codes "interpersonal" and "time" and "access". Together, the constructed focused codes from the data analysis phase acknowledged how mentoring was impacted upon by the personal interplay between mentor and mentee, and the context of volunteerism where time was a valuable commodity which had to be managed carefully.

In considering appropriate criteria from which to consider issues of quality and trustworthiness of the inferences we constructed, we drew upon Lincoln & Guba's (1985) seminal and much cited criteria: credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility in this study was developed through prolonged engagement with volunteers and mentors (12 months) in order to build trust and develop an understanding of the culture of volunteer coaches, and the construction of categorized responses occurred through a collaborative relationship between researchers and participant (member checking). Strategies used to offer opportunities to judge the transferability or usefulness of this study against different contexts were the use of purposive and theoretical sampling, and the presentation of focused codes supplemented by rich examples from the data. Finally, this study has attempted to address confirmability by drawing on Charmaz's (2006) resonance criterion in evaluating the study presented here. For instance, questions that shaped our reflexivity included: Do the codes portray the fullness of the studied experience? Does the grounded theory make sense to the participants who shared the circumstances? Does the analysis offer them deeper insights about their lives and worlds? It should be noted that techniques used for ensuing trustworthiness were embedded throughout the life of the study signalling a view of the process as constructive rather than evaluative (Wolcott, 2001). In practical terms, and

under the aegis of GTM, this meant moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis from which we then re-examined methodological coherence and sampling (theoretical) sufficiency.

## **Findings**

Within the study, mentoring as a learning process was complex, ambiguous, developmentally-stage sensitive, and operated in an environment that was underpinned by volunteerism. Findings revealed that the majority of coaches and mentors failed to perceive value in formalized mentoring processes and, as a result, mentoring in this study was unsustainable as a learning strategy. At the beginning of the 12 month programme, the study was marked by much enthusiasm and aspirational target setting. During the first month, mentors and mentees quickly organised initial meetings in terms of establishing and negotiating goals, outcomes and expectations; activities fuelled by the vigour of the CSP to support volunteer learning, and the vivacity of David, the lead sports development professional, to get the programme up and running. However, as the months proceeded, mentoring activities dissipated as volunteers juggled multiple commitments resulting in formalized mentoring failing to find a relevant space. At the same time, both the CSP and David became detached from their involvement in the programme, content to let participants “get on with it”. By the end of the 12 month programme, few interactional activities were reported. As a result, mentoring in this particular program was under-developed at both practical and theoretical levels and, arguably, resulted in an approach towards mentoring that was over-simplistic. Yet despite its failings, formalized mentoring was still acknowledged by participants in this program as a potentially valuable strategy in supporting volunteer coach learning. Indeed, the place of socially reflective conversations with a skilled mentor or mentors in a supportive community of practice was, theoretically, prized by volunteers.

We now report key findings from data that related to volunteer coaches’ and mentors’ experiences of formalized mentoring. Data are drawn from the three main data collection methods used in this study (interviews, focus groups and questionnaires). Data presented are indented, with quotes denoted by the use of quotation marks. In each data extract, the source of the data is referenced by researcher-allocated name and their role in the study (e.g. mentor/coach).

## Conditions for Volunteer Coach Learning

Data from the study indicated that constructing a formalized mentoring program in terms of matching, reporting mechanism and initial support training (for mentors) was reasonably straightforward, but getting volunteers to engage in mentoring was problematic. As indicated by the quote used at the beginning of this paper, a sharpened level of activity cognizance and strong personal inclination seemed to be required by the volunteers in order for them to recognise the value of engaging with *any* professional development activity. A reflective comment by one mentor on the importance of accessing formal education that was relevant to the volunteers' needs is illustrative: "If people can have an understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing and what they can do to improve, then you are getting somewhere" (Alan-mentor). Indeed data of volunteers' experiences of formalized mentoring and, more broadly, experiences of formalized education generally, revealed that the ability to function as 'learning professionals' required a degree of occupational reflexivity. As one volunteer illustrated;

I think if there were a lot of things that I'd done that didn't work and I could see that the kids just weren't getting it, I might consider asking someone for help. At the moment I don't run into that (Matt-coach).

Findings suggested that decisions to initially engage, and then sustain engagement with formalized mentoring were heavily influenced by a volunteers' perceptions of mentoring supporting their practice. These interpretive acts were the foundations upon which participants came to view the formalized mentoring program described in this study. For example, within the study there were volunteers whose reflections led them to an interpretation that saw the value of mentoring in supporting their practice; "I could see things that I could use and that I couldn't. I suppose it's a spark [mentoring] to think that I could do that or incorporate something" (Kay-coach). Conversely, there were mentees in the study whose reflections were not dynamic; "There isn't anybody. This might sound really big headed but I don't think there's anybody that I can go to that's going to give me anything that I don't already know" (Jane-coach).

Findings from the study also revealed how identity was a critical component in directing volunteers' actions towards formalized mentoring, and then engagement within the process. Volunteers' coaching identity had boundaries, and it was here that volunteer's demonstrated traits such as choice, constraints, and where agency and structure were negotiated. For instance, one volunteer commented that, "I suppose if I wanted to be the National England Under 16 coach, I would want to do it [mentoring]" (Freya-coach), and this shaped her perception of, and subsequent disengagement in, the mentoring program. Similarly, another volunteers' expression of, "I feel cut off because I'm conscious of my ability as a coach. I can get paralysed if I see someone who has been working with National Performance Players and I turn up and I feel that I'm just a recreational tennis coach down the road" (Chris-coach), constrained his inclination to join a group of performance coaches at their monthly meetings. Identity was an important concept because it helped volunteers to organise what they focused on, what they rejected, and in what they participated. In this study, a volunteer youth coach habitus, and specifically in terms of a professional learning, was never addressed as a major constituent in directing the actions of participants.

### **Mentoring as Negotiating Boundaries**

The ways in which participants came to frame the mentoring relationship impacted upon the type and form of the interactions that were negotiated. For example, participants described the function of a mentor in terms of "friend", "companion", "advice-giver", and "somebody to bounce ideas off", and "someone who is easily approachable". The ways in which participants framed the mentoring process was revealing, because how they conceptualised mentoring impacted upon the intensity, focus and duration of their interactions within the program. As Mike (mentor) acknowledged;

"Because there is really no significant contact between us, because we are never in the same place at the same time, and although I can answer emails and take an odd phone call, what they actually wanted was for somebody to be there watching and then having a conversation afterwards about how it went" (Mike-mentor).



At the start of the program, the mentoring relationship was characterized by a period of clarification as participants mapped out the opportunities, challenges and possibilities of the relationship. Volunteers saw the main aims of participating in the mentoring program as one in which to access sport-specific knowledge. For example,

“A lot of the things I do are a bit wishy-washy. There are a lot of workshops, a lot of ‘what do you think’ and actually I’d like to go to a course where they tell me what they do and then I can choose what is applicable to me”. (Nick-coach)

There was consensus among volunteers that mentors would act as a resource who could provide knowledge about technical skills, organization and performance analysis. For volunteer coaches, mentoring was about supporting practice, as opposed to supporting career development, and hence there was an expectation that mentors would observe practice, where possible, and give critical feedback (9 out of 13 mentees identified observation as a primary form of interaction in their mentoring agreement). However, mentors conceived a role that was more passive, seeing the mentor as an information giver (e.g. telephone or email exchange). For example, Elizabeth (mentor) described one of her roles as, “to return correspondence promptly”, Freya (mentor) suggested her role was, “to be available for giving out information”, similarly David (mentor) explained his role in terms of, “To provide information”, and finally Jack (mentor), described what he thought would be coaches’ expectations of his mentoring role, “to act on information provided; to keep updated on progress through regular communication”. For both volunteer and mentor in this study, incoherent and diametric role expectations resulted in interactions that were unsatisfying, unfulfilling and unsustainable for all parties. As a result, data from this study suggested that it was important to understand volunteers’ engagement in mentoring as a process of personal, as opposed to career advancement, learning. It was very much a self directed and active process whereby mentoring engagement was evaluated as worthy of intellectual and emotional investment.

### **Barriers to Formalized Mentoring**

**Interpersonal.** The interpersonal relationship between mentor and volunteer was a key determinant of participants' engagement in formalized mentoring; compatibility between mentor and coach was a critical component for many coaches when actively seeking support and knowledge. Illustrative of this point was Alan's (mentor) reflections on why his formalized mentoring relationships came to a premature end; "I think that the trouble with the program was that it was very sporadic and therefore there was no kind of continuity of relationship. I mean I don't mix with those people socially anyway".

In stark contrast to his experiences of the formalized mentoring program reported in this study, Alan described how a network of informal mentoring relationships had flourished at her local sports club. These interactions were meaningful because interactions were 'local' (accessible), contextualised, and importantly for Alan, based on close interpersonal characteristics;

"There was definitely a bit of a barrier when we were talking. It was all a bit stilted [formal mentoring]. Whereas with these guys (informal) because we have been together for some time we can talk very honestly and openly".

For many participants in the program, formalized mentoring was characterized by irregular contact, a lack of familiarity, a lack of acceptance by coaches, and a mentoring process perceived as a general information resource. Conversely, existing informal mentoring was characterized by regular contact, a sense of affiliation, and situated within an environment of mutual exchange. Volunteers and mentors in the study already operated in informal communities of support and development, and where they were very much self-directed in choosing help when needed. For many, a network of informal mentoring relationships had evolved naturally through the everyday practices of coaching; relationships were formed and sustained because both coach and mentor took something from these relationships. Data indicated that the formalized mentoring seemed to simply add another layer to an already crowded network of mutual support and coaching friendships.

**The volunteer context: Time and access.** The reality for the coaches and mentors reported in this study was that time was a valuable commodity which had to be managed carefully. Volunteer coaches and

mentors therefore needed to weigh up the cost-benefit exchange in selecting and then participating in formalized mentoring. Fifty three per cent of coaches (questionnaires) describing lack of contact and time with their mentor as the reason why the relationship had dissolved. As well as organising practice sessions and organising matches, mentors and coaches may also been involved in the administrative side of the sports clubs. Volunteer coaches therefore needed to weigh up the cost-benefit exchange in selecting and then participating in any formalized CPD activities. Although the importance of mentoring, theoretically, in supporting learning was recognized by participants, practical barriers such as time, but also access were clearly evident. As Sam illustrated when commenting on the reasons her formalized mentoring relationships came to a premature end;

“I spoke to all three of them and said look I really don’t think this is working in its current form. I think if I were a professional coach or professional mentor then yes it would be OK because I would be making time as part of my job to do but when we are all volunteers you kind of have to fit things around what your schedule is and it just didn’t work to be honest with those three” (Sam-mentor).

Sam described how the formalized network of mentoring relationships to which she was assigned failed because of a lack of meaningful interaction. Mentors and coaches were never at the same place at the same time and interactions were confined to virtual coaching conversations (e.g. email). In understanding this case, the value of mentoring, for both coach and mentor requires what Loughran (2002) has called contextual anchors, where participants are able to identify needs, context, problem recognition and acknowledged value. In the case of Sam, recognition of context (e.g. time, distance) in relation to mentoring interactions was never acknowledged during the planning stage and as a consequence, mentoring dyads were dissolved after 6 months of perceived inactivity. Sam’s description of her experiences of formalized mentoring support both Cushion’s (2006) contention that the mentoring process is best served by an accessible mentor, and Eraut’s (2004) suggestion that any framework that promotes professional learning needs to address availability of suitable learning resources and people who are prepared to give appropriate support.

Despite an initial set-up phase which was characterized by a flurry of negotiation in formalising the relationship, mentoring interactions in this study were subsequently sporadic and infrequent. For the majority of participants in the study, formalized mentoring relationships came to a premature end either because they were found to be unfulfilling, or because they simply faded out of consciousness as a result of a period of inactivity. As one coach observed;

“I feel at the moment I’m on a kind of plateau where I’m fairly successful at what I do but actually I know it’s not enough, but mentally there is not the space nor do I have the energy to do it [mentoring].”(Jo-coach).

Similar to the coaches experiences of coach learning in Culver & Trudel’s (2006) study, mentoring was acknowledged as a way of enriching learning situation, but required, and drawing from Wenger (2002), the ‘vitality’ of participants within that community. Findings from the study reported the vitality of participants at the beginning of the program, but this dissipated as the program became sidelined as volunteer coaches juggled multiple commitments. The context, and challenges, of applying a formalized mentoring with volunteers was illustrated by Alan (mentor) who observed how,

“There was a big practical problem which was that I was coaching on pretty much all the evenings, and I didn’t really want to do anything much other than that. It just meant I was never around to have anything other than conversations and emails with them. So it was really quite different to what my expectation of it was; I was busy when they wanted help. There was just no time to do anything”

The findings from this study demonstrate how the concepts of personal interplay, volunteerism and learning cultures were inextricably linked to mentoring experiences for volunteer coaches, and these connections are developed further in the following section.

## **Implications**

Examining the unique context of volunteering and the relationship between this workforce and professional development highlighted considerable pressures on time and space. For volunteers, existing learning opportunities were very much evident in informal provision (e.g. networks). These relationships were valued because they were perceived as easily accessible, communal and offered contextually relevant sources of knowledge. Critically, these relationships provided a short transition time between problem identification (coaching issue) and problem solution. The transition time between problem identification and solution was a particularly important consideration for the volunteers in this study. For instance, knowledge that was not used in practice (i.e. coaches typically related this to formal education) was quickly consigned to what Eraut (1994) has called “cold storage” (p.120). To justify engagement with any professional development activities (such as mentoring), the volunteers in this study needed to walk away from any mode of formalized interaction with their coaching tool box stocked with new ideas that would have an immediate impact on practice. Although the tool box approach to professional knowledge has been criticised for its lack of transferability (Nelson & Cushion 2006), time is a precious commodity for volunteers, and therefore the transfer time or interplay between any professional development activity and practice was a critical condition of volunteer learning. Although participants in this study recognized the value of both formal and informal mentoring provision, data suggested that formalized mentoring needed to find a space that would justify any time and effort given to it in an already crowded environment.

It became evident from participants’ stories of formalized mentoring that meaningful interactions were tempered by conditions of context and intervening barriers. Thus, volunteers’ learning, through mentoring, had boundaries. With regard to context, data revealed the ways in which volunteer operated within a variety of fields (e.g. professional occupation, family, sports club), each one creating a context for learning. These fields shaped the habitus of its members, and, as a community, members shared ways of talking about coaching and coach learning. As Hodgen and Askew (2007) have observed, these various forms of participation represent a nexus of multi-membership; the implication being that,

“confronted by tensions between the different aspects of their identities, individuals are compelled to negotiate and reconcile these different forms of participation and meaning in order to construct an identity that encompasses the membership of different communities” (p. 473).

It could be suggested that coach learning is constrained and/or liberated by the movement of volunteers’ between fields, and such movement is sometimes characterized by cognitive processes such as filtering, selecting and rejecting. Subsequently, participants approached the mentoring relationship from their habitus that guided, focused and engaged their professional learning actions. Data suggested that participants’ interpretations of formalized mentoring were a condition of these experiences.

The recognition of habitus to the learning coach is important for two reasons: first, habitus provided a powerful filter through which volunteers perceived formalized mentoring; and second, habitus was active in guiding volunteers when confronted by new learning (i.e. formalized mentoring). Whilst appreciative of participants’ learning grounded in past experiences, the application of personal domains such as habitus and personal knowledge, have not always been recognized or embraced by formal education (Cushion *et al.*, 2003). Indeed this oversight is problematic, because recognition of the personal constructs of learners underpins an appreciation of what is perceived as valuable, relevant and meaningful when volunteers’ engage with any form of new learning. Data from the study suggested that volunteer’ conceptualisations of mentoring were shaped by individual interpretation and located within wider fields’ of social practice (e.g. professional occupation, family). This act of interpretation shaped, directed and brought into focus what was important to mentees as they engaged with mentoring. The significance for professional educators in applying this understanding is to see the person behind the mentee (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). In so doing, professional educators could begin to identify learner agency in optimising the possibilities, and constraints, of formalized mentoring.

The application of the concept of habitus to this study is valuable because it offers a way of analysing the subjective experiences of participants in relation to the objective structures and contexts in which the mentoring process operated. With this in mind, Reay (1995) has identified a range of questions which could be adapted to examine the volunteer mentoring experiences reported in this study; for example: How well is the

volunteer/mentor adapted to the context of mentoring? How do their tacit dispositions shape their responses to the mentoring? What learning cultures (fields) do they bring to mentoring and how are they manifested? What is the meaning of non-verbal behaviour as well as individuals' use of language? Such questions then begin to raise issues of gender, race and power alongside those of social class in using habitus to further examine the mentoring relationship.

Analysis of data suggested that the process of negotiating the boundaries of participation resulted in the enactment of the mentoring relationship, and that the key processes involved were: framing mentoring, clarifying role expectation, and negotiating meaningful interaction. For instance, findings suggested that incoherent and diametric role expectations resulted in learning interactions that were unsatisfying, unfulfilling and unsustainable; both mentors and coaches were unsure of what was expected of them, and what they were trying to achieve. The notion of mentoring dissonance between mentee and mentor is not uncommon. In education, Edwards and Protheroe (2004) suggested that typical interactions in mentoring relationships were characterized by one-dimensional support and descriptive reiterations, resulting in conversations that failed to, “encourage student teachers to engage in responsive pedagogic acts” (p. 194). Similarly, Jones (2001) described the mentors in her study as advice-givers and, as a result, limited students’ abilities to “respond appropriately to the complex and unpredictable mechanisms underlying human interaction” (p. 92). These studies suggest that tensions and disappointments between mentees and mentors are sometimes a result of incompatible expectations as well as a possible divergence of fit. As Bullough, Young, Hall, and Draper (2008) have suggested, in teacher education, there is a requirement that mentors possess the cognitive maturity that best serves their mentees.

Evidence from this study, and the wider mentoring literature, describes the mentoring process as constituted by actions, dispositions and interpretations of participants. In turn, these interactions are communicated within, and outside, a particular field (such as CSP). As such, mentoring, as experienced by volunteers in this study, was shaped by the learning culture from which it was situated. The importance of this point was that the volunteers’ in this study participated in a formalized mentoring programme that was shaped by a learning culture (CSP) that overtly, and tacitly, promoted the values, criteria, and notions of quality that it attached to formalized mentoring. Evidence suggested, however, that mentoring as a learning strategy was not

well developed within the CSP, and that participants' were left to "get on with it". It is perhaps not surprising that without an established learning culture in which continuous professional development is engrained in the everyday practices of practitioners, a degree of professional learning inertia was evident in volunteers' experiences of formalized mentoring.

Findings from the study suggest that there is a need to re-conceptualise volunteer learning in ways that differ from formal models, borrowed from business and education. Instead, findings indicate that mentoring with volunteers might be best located within a community model (eg sports clubs, rather than a regional organization like the CSP) that can maximise professional learning in a shared and sustained social network. A community of practice framework recognises a community identity that, in turn, shapes the habitus of its members; and such community exists because participation has value for its members (e.g. opportunities for social engagement). Such communities and their core values are shaped by organizational culture and are perceived to be a more sustainable model (Singh, Bains & Vinnicombe, 2002). It is, perhaps, this latter model that has potential in conceptualizing mentoring programs in community sport because of the isolated and voluntary nature of the vast majority of coaches' practice.

Professional practice has been described as the process of changing existing situations into preferred ones (Glaser, 1999). However, for the individual practitioner, the ability to undergo this process sometimes requires some form of assisted guidance from which to guide enquiry, establish context and meaning, and promote the advancement professional practice. Where professional learning and professional knowledge construction are acknowledged as complex, intimidating and consuming, evidence from this study suggests a central role for a competent and dedicated mentor, embedded in a cultural space (organisation, community) where learning is valued, in supporting volunteer coach professional development. In the context of formalized mentoring programs with community-based volunteers, it could be argued that such requirements are more likely to be met from mentors who have a salaried professional position. In this study, the scenario of a volunteer coach interacting with a volunteer mentor in a formal mentoring framework, did not lead to sustained learning interactions because mentoring was not a priority for either party.

## **Conclusion**



Volunteer coaches' and their mentors' experiences of formalized mentoring were conditions of three dimensions: personal interplay, context (volunteerism), learning culture (CSP). We argue, therefore, that there is a need to move beyond the dualistic identification of formalized mentoring as the interaction between individual (mentor/mentee) and context (volunteerism), and where each are examined from either the perspective of the individual or the context. Instead, we found it useful to draw on a theory of cultural learning that serves to recognise learning as a consequence of participants' embodied engagement in mentoring practices and actions, shaped by the culture in which such practices are situated. Moreover, volunteer coaches also interacted and belonged to multiple social settings (e.g. family, occupation, sport), each one culturally constituted, and which impacted (subconsciously and consciously) on volunteers' perceptions, behaviours, dispositions and actions towards formalized mentoring. Critically, these social settings represented sites of cultural learning through the social practices of that group, and formalized mentoring for volunteer coaches operated within this multidimensional context. The challenge, in the context of volunteerism, is to capture the essence of communities of practice in pursuit of a dynamic learning culture where formalized mentoring is valued, relevant and beneficial to both mentor and mentee. In the case of volunteer coaches operating in the UK, this is not yet the case. With stronger theoretical foundations in volunteer mentoring activities, the value to individuals, and communities, of formalized mentoring as a way of supporting professional practice might be better realized.

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