

Reflective Practice and Sports Coaching

Introduction

McKernan (1996) refers to reflective teaching as '*... not a knowledge-bounded set of competencies which are learned during student teaching, but on the contrary teaching that reflectively supports... growth and professionalism through the questioning of policies, problems and the consequences of actions.*' This is true in relation to the coach.

Pollard (2002) suggests that '*Reflective teaching is applied in cyclical or spiralling process, in which teachers monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continually.*'

According to Reid (1993) cited by Ghaye and Lilleyman (1997) reflective practice is: '*Potentially both a way of learning and a mode of survival and development once formal education ceases.*' They believe that reflective practice is more than just skill to be used in one particular context but throughout life as well.

'Reflective practice requires professionals to step back from themselves and the situation to examine all aspects of the teaching/learning act, including essential dispositions. It implies that they use an empirical, analytical review of their teaching and that they employ a moral and ethical framework to guide their analysis and modification of teaching behaviour.' Boise State University (No Date)

Monitoring and Assessing Reflective Coaching Practice

McKernan (1996) suggests that coach evaluations '*...must be an enquiry into one's own performance. One needs to have a set of questions to which answers are sought through some sort of research agenda into one's professional practice.*' For example coaches must ask themselves "What have the children learnt from today's session and how can I improve upon it?"

There are a number of different methods for assessing coaching practice. For example a coach:

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'...might use a video recorder to trap teaching performance as evidence or 'data' to be analysed. More importantly, such a film becomes a critical documentary for reflecting on practice...research can be undertaken by reactive methods such as observers, questionnaires, interviews, dialogue journals or through such non-reactive techniques as case studies, field notes, logs, diaries anecdotal records, document analysis, shadow studies.' McKernan (1996)

'I've had students make brief journal entries at the end of each session...it doesn't take much time but reading and responding to the journal entries is time consuming. An approach taken from the values clarification literature is to ask students for one word that represents their behaviour that day.' Hellison (1985)

Evaluation of Reflective Practice

Pollard (2002) states the importance of the reflection within coaching. *'The process of reflective teaching supports the development and maintenance of professional expertise.'* If the coach cannot find errors or weaknesses to build upon then they could be seen as to have reached a dead end.

McKernan (1996) refers to the coaching process as a ladder. To get any higher performers must extend their ladder by making it longer through reflection and hopefully improvement, or they and their will be limited to the same level.

In the reflection process, when one party is stuck or does not understand or feels misunderstood then communication can break down. The timing of an evaluation is important. After a hard training session a performer may blame a poor performance on the coach. This poor performance may not be linked to the coach at all but a 'hard night out' the day before or inappropriate food intake for example.

Importance of Coaching Reflectively

Reflective practice allows the coach to appreciate the need for different styles or method of coaching for different populations, societies or age groups. Without a reflective framework the coach could not ensure continual re-evaluation his/her work.

Therefore adaptation of coaching sessions may not be appropriate or in line with the needs of the participants and in some cases may never take place.

Selecting an appropriate coaching style and adapting or changing the style to suit the situation also recognises that some populations need more independence and self-reliance to continue their progress. A coach should value and encourage this while still recognising those who also require interdependence within the group.

Reflective practice demands the coach to examine their own behaviour honestly, reminding them to act responsibly in their actions. Reflective evaluation highlights areas where the population, for example, children, have a great social need besides their particular sport. When designing training sessions it is important to consider the childhood of that child. Extreme training sessions may ruin their childhood.

A coach may come across a person under their supervision who demonstrates a different way other than the norm of performing. Dribbling practice in football, for example, a person may come across a new way of taking a ball past a defender. This new way could be a great skill and prove very useful in the future and should be appreciated as an artistic flair to the sport.

A reflective coach may often face the possibility of not 'having all the answers' to questions which are currently encouraged in a reflective manner. It would be altogether too easy for the coach to revert back to text books moves or tactics that the coach has a firm idea of. Rarely do situations occur exactly 'by the book', therefore specificity of practice has not been applied. Experimenting with current ideas may unlock team or individuals' potential. However, while allowing experimentation it is important for the coach to remain decisive and certain about his or her actions. Failure to do so may reduce the performer's confidence in the coach.

'Every teacher must...by regarding every imperfection in the pupil's comprehension, not as a defect of the pupil but as a defect in his own instruction, endeavour to develop in himself the ability of discovering new methods.' Tolstoy (1861/1967) pp.57-58 cited by Schön (1991)

The progressing coach should be able to look at his or her methods critically. Positive teaching points can be reproduced and progressed for other participate groups. They can be extra 'tools in the coach's toolbox'. Flaws in teaching or coaching may be

reproduced by the performer, block performer learning, reduce retention of skills or even prevent further participation.

Reflective Practice and Coaching Link

Reflective practice is explicitly detailed as being essential in increasing coaching effectiveness (Crisfield, 1998; Clifford and Feezell, 1997). Crisfield (1998) considers coaching effectiveness to be determined by factors such as knowledge, skills, experience and philosophy. To evaluate coaching these factors should be analysed within the coaching elements specific to coaching. There is generally considered to be three main elements within coaching (Crisfield et al, 1996):

1. planning
2. delivery
3. evaluation

Crisfield (1998) states coaches need knowledge about:

- the technicalities, rules, strategies, tactics and competitive structures of their sport
- understand training principles and fitness strategies, how to design fitness sessions and programmes with periodisation
- how people learn, execute, refine and maintain skills consistently and under pressure
- how to plan and structure group and individual coaching sessions for maximum enjoyment and improvement, ensuring safety
- how to strengthen the mental factors such as concentration and confidence that influence performance
- their performers- their goals, experiences, likes and dislikes, life outside sport, as well as their chronological, developmental and training age if they are young people

Crisfield (1998) suggests that possessing knowledge alone does not produce an effective coach and certain skills are acquired, often through experience. Such skills include interpersonal, planning, problem solving and self-analysis or personal reflection.

Coaching philosophy containing aims and values about why and how you coach are also important as they strongly influence your coaching behaviour (Crisfield, 1998; Cross and Lyle, 1999). It describes both the coach's role and others linked to the performer. It notes the extent to which the performer is responsible for their development and how much they contribute to their training plan, the relative importance of competition outcome to long term development and wellbeing of performers. It answers questions on the importance of adhering to rules and intensity of training for children. (Crisfield, 1999)

Cross and Lyle (1999) cite the work of Douge and Hastie (1993) describing an unexhaustive list of components and skills that coaches should possess:

1. *'Frequent provision of feedback and incorporation of numerous prompts and hussles*
2. *Provision of high levels of correction and re-instruction*
3. *Use of high levels of questioning and clarifying*
4. *Engagement in instruction*
5. *Management of the training environment to achieve considerable order'*

Planning, delivery and evaluation form a cycle (Crisfield et al 1996). Where the link is weakest the next session suffers. Evaluating my performance has helped me not to make the same mistakes again in my delivery and planning. Absence of constructive criticism restricts the evolution of coaching.

Summary

Bompa (1999) delivers an ultimatum to the coach *'...further your personal training knowledge, improve self control or be honest and advise the athlete to look for a superior coach.'*

In summary a reflective coach should look for the following qualities:

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- Positive praise with understanding
- Immediate accurate feedback
- Private criticism only to the athlete
- Role model of confidence
- Mindset of no prejudiced limits to performance
- Humility surrounding athlete's performance
- Encourage appropriate recovery
- Wealth of knowledge
- Continuously learning and evolving
- Appropriate level of intervention and re-instruction
- Management and organisation of training environment

The importance of reflective coaching is not just about finding and defining the problem, most people can do that. Organising, planning and acting upon it are essential also. There must also be re-evaluation to see if it has solved the problem and continual evaluation resumed.

Adapted from Department of Education for Northern Ireland (1999) cited by Pollard (2002) this mission statement sums up the truth of the reflective coach: *'At the heart of becoming a good teacher is, above all else, being a learner-a life long learner. To learn one has to ask questions of oneself...'*

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