Formal vs. Informal Coach Education

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ABSTRACT
The training of coaches is considered central to sustaining and improving the quality of sports coaching and the ongoing process of professionalisation. Sports coaches participate in a range of learning opportunities (informal to formal) that contribute to their development to varying degrees. In this article, we present our collective understanding on the varying types of learning opportunities and their contribution to coach accreditation and development. The authors presented these views (from a sports pedagogy perspective) as part of a workshop entitled “Formal vs. Informal Coach Education” at the 2007 International Council of Coach Education Master Class in Beijing. These reflections seek to stimulate the on-going, and often sterile, debate about formal versus informal coach education/learning in order to progress scholarship in coaching.

Key words: Adult Learning, Coach Accreditation, Mentoring, Professionalisation, Sports Coaching

INTRODUCTION
Coach education/training and subsequent continuing coach development is considered to be essential to both sustaining and improving the quality of sports coaching [1]. Coach development is assumed as an all-encompassing term that refers to the process leading towards enhanced expertise. This learning occurs from accessing a range of opportunities (informal to formal). In an attempt to support this development, coach education systems around the world have been developed and are in a constant process of renewal and reconstruction. Moreover, in the context of its adult learning character (post-compulsory education, part-time, diverse in previous learning), there is an ongoing issue about the most efficient and effective means of aggregating and accrediting the coach’s varied learning experiences. Of special interest is the level and nature of the contribution made by learning from all types of experiences to coach accreditation and development.

During the International Council of Coach Education Master Class in Beijing (2007), a workshop entitled “Formal vs. Informal Coach Education” was held. The authors, from three
countries (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom), were invited, based on their applied and academic experience in coach education, to present their individual perspectives on this topic and then to engage in discussion with the audience. At the end of the workshop, a list of unanswered questions was developed. These questions included:

- Should we be talking about formal/informal learning, rather than education?
- What are the advantages and limits of formal and informal education?
- How can we integrate formal and informal education?
- Is there a ‘recommended order’ for the formal/informal aggregation of learning?
- Are there some coincidental factors that make informal education more powerful (e.g., previous educational experience)?
- Should mentoring be considered to be formal or informal education?

In this article, we address these questions by presenting our collective understanding of the general topic that is coach education, with the objective of making some progress in the ongoing and often sterile debate about formal versus informal coach education/learning. To reach this goal we have divided this paper into four sections: a) What terminology should be used?; b) What does the coaching literature have to say about coaches’ learning; c) What are the benefits and limitations of formal and informal learning situations; and d) Is there a preferred sequencing of learning opportunities? In the conclusion, we identify some key statements that might provide guidance for coach development. The importance of furthering discussion on these broader questions is to provide first, clarity, enhanced understanding and useful insights into current thinking in coach education; and second, some direction for coach development and developers. Progressing scholarship on coach education can guide the conceptual framework underpinning coach education and its implementation.

**WHAT TERMINOLOGY TO USE?**

One of the main issues that contributes to the lack of resolution in this debate is the lack of a clear and consensual terminology. While discussion is not limited to the degree of formality, a cursory examination of recent documents in the education and coaching fields [2-5] identifies three basic terms, each used in many and varied expressions:

- **Formal**: formal education, formal educational institutions, formal learning, formal coach learning programs, formal learning institutions;
- **Informal**: informal learning, informal learning activities, informal learning experiences.

In considering these terms, we noticed that education and learning are often associated with formal or nonformal, while learning seems to be used only with informal situations. Formal learning situations are associated with institutionally sanctioned structures and (guided) delivery, whereas the informal situations may be assumed to provoke learning but are likely to be unguided and/or incidental. To clarify the situation further, it is necessary to explore our understanding of the relationship between education and learning. To address whether education and learning are synonymous, it is important to go back to the basic concepts. The framework proposed by Coombs and Ahmed [6] is often cited [4] as the first attempt to classify the different education/learning modes. This extended quote from Coombs and
Ahmed’s book [6] is particularly revealing:

In formulating these concepts we began with a functional view of education, in contrast to the structural and institutional approach used in most educational planning and administration. This obliged us to start our analysis with the learners and their needs, and to move only then to the question of what educational means might be most appropriate to meeting these needs. This, as we saw it, put the horse before the cart. We also began with the conviction (later underscored by UNESCO’s International Commission for the Development of Education) that education can no longer be viewed as a time-bound, place-bound process confined to schools and measured by years of exposure. These considerations led us to adopt from the beginning a concept that equates education with learning, regardless of where, how or when the learning occurs. Thus defined, education is obviously a continuing process, spanning the years from earliest infancy through adulthood and necessarily involving a great variety of methods and sources. We found it analytically useful, and generally in accord with current realities, to distinguish between three modes of education (recognizing that there is considerable overlap and interaction between them): 1) informal education, 2) formal education, and 3) nonformal education. (p. 8)

In their attempt to describe the different educative forces that influence learning in developing countries, these authors have used the term education and used it as a synonym for learning. In Western countries, the term education has gained a meaning that differentiates it from learning: “Traditionally education has been regarded as the institutionalisation of learning – learning is the process which occurred in individuals and education is the social provision of the opportunities to learn (and be taught) formally” [7, p. 63]. The sometimes narrow conceptions of ‘education’ and ‘learning’ are problematic, which reflects to some degree the issue of ‘languaging’; i.e., clarifying the intended meanings of the terms used [8-10]. Nevertheless, perhaps we should distinguish between education and learning. It is possible to achieve this using the two perspectives of the program developer (education) and the learner (learning).

Program developers (e.g., administrators of coach accreditation) assert significant control over curriculum design, delivery, content, assessment tasks and grading to award certification. However, research [e.g., 1, 11-14] has shown that coach education/accreditation is less valued than experiential learning and other less formal opportunities. From the education program developers’ perspective, learning is intended to occur in formal situations within coach education programs. In this formal situation, learning is mediated [15] or guided [16] by some knowledgeable other. Learners in these formal situations have less control over what information is delivered which, in turn, influences what can be learned. That is, the program developers direct what is to be learned. Typically, assessment drives learning and consequently, the learner has little control of what they learn or at least what is most attractive or advantageous to learn.

We have seen in the last few decades a worldwide trend to establish large-scale national coach education programs in order to contribute to the development of coaching as a profession and to certify or accredit coaches (e.g., the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate, National Coaching Certification Program [Canada], the National Coach Accreditation Scheme [Australia], and the National Standards for Sport Coaches developed by the National Association for Sport & Physical Education [USA]). For both purposes, program developers have to advance a recognised and endorsed curriculum that specifies the
knowledge/competencies to be taught and mastered by coaches. Given their aims, these large-scale programs will be adjudged as effective only if the formal curriculum is relatively standardised and quality assured. Using Merriam et al.’s [3] definition of formal education, we can define formal coach education as “highly institutionalised, bureaucratic, curriculum driven, and formally recognized with grades, diplomas, or certificates” (p. 29). However, we need to dissociate the ‘formal’ in education from large-scale institutional provision only. For example, coaches might receive direct guidance from more experienced coaches in a formal or structured ‘mentoring’ relationship or continuing professional development workshop programmes. Therefore, it is appropriate to include formal educational opportunities at work.

Such formal coach education/accreditation programs have often been criticised for being very limited in the scope of their achievements [17-19]. To avoid losing potential volunteer coaches, the programs are often delivered over short periods of time with few, if any, entry standards. For the more elite coaches, the large-scale programs have been shown to be ineffective in providing them with all that they need to be a successful coach [1, 12-14, 21-23]. To compensate for these shortcomings, or what Brennan [24] calls “reactions to the limitations or failures of formal education” (p. 187), coaches are either invited (often by the local sport association, sport clubs or coaches associations) or through their own volition, to attend conferences, workshops, and seminars. These activities can be classified as nonformal coach education, that is, “organized learning opportunities outside the formal educational system. These offerings tend to be short-term, voluntary, and have few if any prerequisites” [3, p. 30]. It should be noted that the short-term nature and general lack of prerequisites also feature heavily in criticisms of the large-scale, formal education provisions. Despite this, these nonformal coach education opportunities (continuing professional development) can be ongoing, highly varied and very extensive. However, these nonformal learning opportunities might be best conceptualised as slightly less formal, rather than nonformal, in light of the typically structured and relatively formal manner in which such opportunities are organised.

Characteristic of these nonformal forums for learning is the guidance by ‘knowledgeable others’. Perhaps it is best to consider all forms of learning situations along an informal-formal continuum, with Cushion et al.’s [1] notion of nonformal coach learning (based on Coombs & Ahmed’s 1974 classification) located closer to the formal end of the continuum. Even in nonformal opportunities there are informal learning situations (e.g., in the foyers outside conference presentations and in purposeful networking).

The recognition of everyday experiences as valuable learning opportunities has gained increased acceptance within the fields of education [e.g., 25], workplace learning [e.g., 26, 27], and sports coaching [e.g., 1, 4, 23, 28, 29]. In studies where coaches have been questioned on their learning, the results have often shown that coaches also learned without the direct guidance of others during their day-to-day activities [23, 29]. These coaching experiences, which are happening outside the formal and nonformal (less formal) coach education opportunities, are generally associated with informal learning [4]. Marsick and Watkins [30, 31], whose work in adult education has relevance to coach development, added the term incidental learning, which helps to nuance the definition of informal learning:

Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Incidental learning is defined as a by-product of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or
even formal learning. Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning. Incidental learning, on the other hand, almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it. [30, p. 12]

Given the diversity of parties interested in examining the education or learning of coaches, complete consensus regarding the terminology used to describe the ways in which coaches learn to perform their work is difficult. The development of shared understandings of key terms is paramount to quality debate [10]. The process of ‘languaging’ is therefore important, because it is the subtleties and nuances of coach learning that are of great interest.

We know that there are some key principles through which we can evaluate the likelihood of a positive learning experience [32]. These include the level of intrinsic motivation (how satisfying, relevant and meaningful the experience is), the degree of ownership of the process (autonomy), the element of engagement (learning by doing), and the extent to which the learner has the opportunity to apply/make sense of the learning. In the context of paid work, Billett [16], who has made significant contributions to understanding adult learning in various vocations, has demonstrated that these aspects of agency are central to the learning that is possible. Similarly, the characteristics of the educational provisions such as the amount and quality of feedback, degree of accessibility and other invitational qualities are similarly critical to the learning that is and is not possible [16, 32]. Of prime interest is the complementarity of learning opportunities that contribute to coach development and the added challenge of recognising these varying contributions particularly for coach accreditation.

WHAT THE COACHING LITERATURE SAYS ABOUT COACHES’ LEARNING

Several recent studies in Australia, Canada and the UK have highlighted that coaches’ learning in recreational [e.g., 33], developmental [e.g., 1, 33, 34] and elite [e.g., 23, 29, 35] environments is sourced from many different learning situations. Formal coach education programs have been shown to make varying but often-limited contributions. Overall, these studies on coaches’ learning have highlighted the significant contributions of informal learning experiences.

Coach learning research has recently been conducted in Australia with the elite coaches of the Queensland Academy of Sport [23] and Australian Football League [29]. The nature of these studies necessarily took a workplace learning focus and in doing so, particular attention was paid to the affordances made by the workplace (structure) and the agency of the coaches. In both contexts, the workplaces provided, and the high performance coaches accessed, a range of sources that could be considered to be formal, informal or somewhere in between. Even prior to their employment with these organisations, the coaches accessed a range of learning opportunities. However, it was the informal learning involved in performing their everyday work activities that made the greatest contributions to their ongoing development as coaches. It should be noted that this could not always be considered to be the optimal situation and was not always by choice. The volatile, guarded, and fundamentally competitive nature of elite coaching work meant that they were often unable to access sources of learning that they identified as being of potential value to their development.

Recent studies on how Canadian youth volunteer coaches learn [33, 34] revealed the same learning opportunities as with the elite coaches in Australia. The youth coaches in these
studies reported varying access to several different learning situations. Using Moon’s notion of mediated and unmediated learning situations, Wright et al. [34] found that unmediated (unguided, informal) learning provided the largest contribution to youth ice hockey coach development. Both studies also supported the view that the lack of collegiality was a significant barrier to coaches’ learning.

Some recent coaching literature has focused on situated learning [1, 23, 29, 36]. Situated learning [37] places emphasis on the contexts that construct and constitute learning. Central to this understanding about learning is the notion that we learn through our lived experiences from participation in everyday life. In Lave and Wenger’s [37] original conception, situated learning was a type of informal education. However, it wasn’t really incidental, more of a loosely structured informality. It seems clear in their examples that learning was ‘intended’ to take place, in that the examples were ‘guided’, and were consequently structured in delivery and intent. Mallett et al. [29] and Rynne et al. [23] in two studies with elite coaches reported that much of these coaches’ learning was consistent with the notion of informal learning that was mostly unguided. Therefore, we perhaps need to add the word ‘guided’ or ‘mediated’ [15] to our vocational typologies. The term ‘guided’ [16] and the phrase ‘mediated informal learning’ implies that someone (e.g., master coach) other than the learner deliberately facilitates learning in an informal way. This needs to be distinguished from learning that is incidental. Just to muddy the waters, we might also conceptualise learning that is unguided, that is when learning is self-directed. In unguided learning, some learning is deliberate (e.g., trial and error) and other learning more incidental (that is, unplanned), but thought likely to happen (albeit uncontrolled and unstructured). Perhaps, we should consider the terms ‘guided informal learning’ and ‘unguided informal learning’, with the latter deemed to include ‘incidental informal learning’. Further work and more widespread debate are needed to come up with a clear terminology. Of key interest is the question of how those in charge of coach accreditation can embrace and account for such valued learning.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING SITUATIONS?**

It is possible to aggregate these deliberations about learning from formal, nonformal and informal situations into a series of advantages and disadvantages. There may also be something about coaching that lends itself to a more weighted balance between these varying learning opportunities. It might be argued that vocational, occupation-specific education is typically characterised by a period of prior learning through formal education that is accompanied by applied practice, and a period of practice leading to professional recognition. In the professions, a continuing status may be dependent upon a further series of formal courses and appropriate practice. There is no doubt that sport coaching fits the occupation-specific training example, but the national sport organisation awards on which recognition is based necessarily begin with a relatively minimalistic provision and may require a period of experience before subsequent levels of award (i.e., certification) may be achieved. That is, eligibility for participating in a higher coaching award (level of certification or accreditation) is typically contingent upon coaches coaching for a specified time (e.g., two years).

Formal learning opportunities have the advantages of being packaged, having access to experts, formal assessment procedures, quality assurance measures, and recognition of achievement. It has also been argued that traditional formal education (e.g., tertiary education) has the capacity to lead to the development of critical thinking skills. This is an aspect that has been shown to be vital to continued success for coaches, at least in the area of high-performance sports coaching [13, 22]. However, in relation to the learning principles
adduced earlier, the formal opportunities may lack context and meaning, and the level of individualisation may be limited. On the other hand, less formal opportunities through apprenticeships, mentoring, workshops, everyday coaching tasks, and the like, score highly on authenticity, meaning and contextualisation. Less formal opportunities may suffer from a lack of quality control, direction, feedback, and innovation. In addition and as alluded to previously, coaches may have difficulties accessing some opportunities due to the contested nature of sport at all levels [23, 29, 33, 34].

Informal learning opportunities, regardless of whether they are intended to be part of a wider program or not, may demonstrate benefits and limits. Coaches are at liberty to consult any or all sources of information to help them address their own specific coaching issues. However, as indicated earlier, in some workplaces someone may facilitate learning by offering varying levels of guidance. The limitations in such guidance can result from the lack of quality assurance of the information received and the inability of coaches to search for new information; coaches cannot search for information on that which is unknown. At one end of the continuum is the structured, mentored experience, which is characterised by direction, feedback and a measure of evaluation. At the other end of the continuum is the unguided or unmediated situation from which valuable learning may be acquired, but which lacks quality assurance or the development of understanding (although this can be overcome through appropriate analysis and reflection).

IS THERE A PREFERRED SEQUENCING OF LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN COACH DEVELOPMENT?

Developers of coach education programs should consider and recognise a range of learning opportunities in designing the curriculum and accrediting coaches. Furthermore, the sequence in which coaches engage with learning opportunities to facilitate coach development is worthy of some discussion. Based on the literature [14], we can say that most coaches have a common starting point: being an athlete. At this starting point, the learning that occurs might be considered to be predominantly incidental. From there, the learning pathway is idiosyncratic, which seems congruent with the concept of ‘lifelong learning’, a term that has recently replaced ‘lifelong education’ [3]. Should it be otherwise? If we take the learner’s perspective, probably not, because the catalyst, capacity and motive to participate in a coach education program, attend a conference, or to meet with other coaches to discuss/debate coaching issues will depend on perceived benefits, instrumentality, the career trajectory of the coach, and what he or she may already know about the topic. In this case, it is not only the availability of a range of learning opportunities, but the willingness of the individual to engage that will determine the ‘sequence’ of learning [38]. Indeed, a consideration of the part the individual plays in all learning situations is an important component of more recent theorising [e.g., 23, 29, 38].

Recently, using Moon’s [15, 39] generic view of learning, Werthner and Trudel [40] presented a new theoretical (coach’s) perspective to understand how coaches learn to coach:

The coach’s cognitive structure is at the centre of this figure and will change and adapt under the influences of three types of learning situations. In mediated learning situations, such as formalized coaching courses, another person directs the learning. In unmediated learning situations, there is no instructor and the learner takes the initiative and is responsible for choosing what to learn. Finally, there are the internal learning situations, where there is a reconsideration of existing ideas in the coach’s cognitive structure. [p. 199]
In the model suggested by Werthner and Trudel [40], the mediated learning situations will regroup all the formal and less formal learning situations; and the unmediated learning situations will be the informal/incidental learning situations. The third learning situation can be seen as a nice complement since it refers to the process of reflection without necessarily any external new material to consider; it is working ‘within’ or in other terms a ‘cognitive housekeeping’. In all learning situations, the learner (re)produces knowledge, dependent upon the interplay between a coach’s agency and the affordances provided.

Apart from incidental learning (about coaching) that often occurs during sport participation, there is little to support a preferred sequencing of learning opportunities. However, what we can say is that a range of learning opportunities should be afforded coaches and the differential relationship between a coach and those affordances will determine the learning that does and does not take place.

**CONCLUSION**

The requirement for appropriate and systematic regulatory processes to ensure quality assurance in coach accreditation has probably fuelled the debate between particular forms of education/learning (e.g., informal vs. formal), because of the challenge of how to measure and what to accredit in relation to less-than-formal learning situations. Coaches need to access varying educational opportunities (formal to informal) that facilitate learning and subsequent coach development. Therefore, a debate between formal and informal coach education/learning really has little value. It is not a matter of which form of education/learning is superior, but acknowledging the unique contributions all forms may make to coach development and accreditation. All education/learning situations should be valued for their contribution to coach development, which is a lifelong process.

The growing evidence available [1, 12, 23, 29, 33, 34] suggests that coaches ‘feel’ that more learning is taking place in the ‘informal’ setting (or at the very least that it is valuable). This may be occasioned by the element of social scaffolding, contextualisation, relevance of domain, recognition of individual role frame, and a number of the learning principles identified in the introduction. Distinguishing between different forms of learning (formal to informal) might be less helpful than acknowledging their varying contributions to coach development. It is not the false debate between formal versus informal education, but how and what coach accreditation recognises from less than formal education/learning situations that is the more significant challenge.

We can identify a number of statements that provide guidance for coach development:

- Guided or mediated learning can accelerate coaching knowledge (re)production and subsequent coach development. However, formal learning situations cannot deliver all key learning principles;
- Formal educational situations cannot encompass all of the experiential learning required to ‘embed’ learning;
- The potential disadvantages of informal educational situations can be ameliorated by elements of structured mentoring and learning contracts;
- The experiential element of learning can be moved from work experience to apprenticeship by adding a degree of structure, reflection, and evaluation;
- Formal education needs extensive and variable experiences to convert situated learning to understanding.
REFERENCES


