

HOW COACHES LEARN THROUGH OBSERVATION

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Literature Review

Observational learning (OL) can be described as learning through the observation of another or oneself, either live or on video, performing a specific behavior. Within the sport context, Cumming, Clark, Ste-Marie, McCullagh, and Hall (2005) developed the Functions of Observational Learning Questionnaire (FOLQ) and identified three functions of OL; skill, strategy, and performance. The skill function refers to observing and learning technical aspects of the sport. The strategy function refers to observing and learning the in-game strategies or game management aspects. Finally, the performance function represents observing and learning how to obtain the proper mental state required for optimal performance. Therefore, OL can be used for cognitive and motivational functions, which is similar to that evidenced in the imagery literature.

Researchers have explored athletes' use of OL and found that athletes use all three functions of OL (Wesch, Law, & Hall, 2007). Additionally, athletes used the skill function significantly more than the strategy and performance functions, while the strategy function was used significantly more than the performance function (e.g., Cumming, et al., 2005). More recently, Hancock, Rymal, and Ste-Marie (2008) investigated the use of OL with sport officials. Similar to that found in athletes, their results indicated that sport officials used the skill function most often, followed by the strategy function, and lastly the performance function.

Unquestionably, coaches also learn through observing others. This can be seen through assistant coaches learning from head coaches or head coaches learning from other highly regarded coaches in their field. In fact, we would argue that learning through observation is a critical aspect for improving coaching proficiency. Interesting, however, coaches' use of OL has not yet been explored, thus bringing us to the purpose of this study.

Purpose

To explore the functions of observational learning utilized by coaches.

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that coaches would report using OL. Further, similar to athletes and officials, coaches would use the skill function of OL most often followed by the strategy function then the performance function.

Participants

81 male and female coaches within Ontario were administered a modified FOLQ so as to have the questions reflect the coaching context. This modification only resulted in the change of wording in two of the statements (see appendix A). Coaches were involved in sports such as gymnastics, volleyball, basketball, swimming, trampoline, badminton, soccer, hockey, curling, rugby, and track and field.

Analysis and Results

A one way ANOVA was conducted for the three functions of OL. Reliability analysis was performed on all three scales and each one was deemed acceptable with Cronbach alpha coefficients ranged from 0.82 to 0.87. Results indicated a significant ($p < .001$) difference between all three functions of OL. Pairwise comparisons showed that coaches used the skill function of OL significantly more than the strategy function which, in turn, was used significantly more than the performance function. Given that the scale ranged from 1 to 7, this data suggests that all three functions are used by coaches.

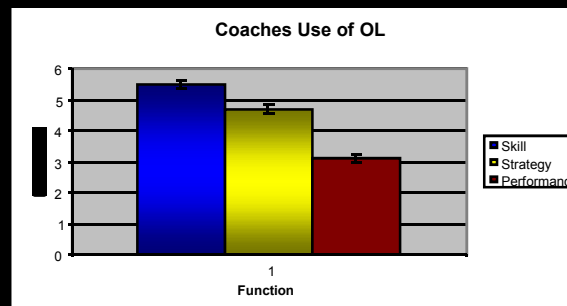


Figure 1: Mean scores for each function

Discussion

It is evident that coaches use OL in order to increase their coaching skills and tactics. Specifically, coaches use the skill function for technical coaching skills. An example would include a gymnastics coach observing another coach performing a proper spotting technique. Coaches also use observation for learning from other coaches about strategy, which could potentially include an assistant hockey coach learning breakout plays from the head coach. Finally, coaches observe other coaches for the performance function. An example of this would be a coach observing another coach for the purpose of learning how to remain calm in an intense

situation, or how to self-regulate in stressful situations. Noteworthy is that although coaches did report using the performance function, it was used significantly less than the other two more obvious functions. Formal instruction that encourages OL on the part of coaches for all three functions is recommended.

Limitations and Future Direction

One limitation of the study was that the FOLQ was designed for athletes' use of OL and we administered a modified version of the questionnaire. A reliability check, however, was performed and indicated that all scales met acceptable reliability. Further, we did have a select group of coaches read the modified version and agree that the items were pertinent to the coaching context. Another possible limitation was the number of participants ($n=81$) as well as the number of coaches in which each sport was represented. For example, the majority of coaches were from gymnastics ($n=45$), with the other 36 representing a variety of other sports. With so many sports in North America, this sample size may not be representative of all coaches across sports. Further data collection is presently in progress in order to address this issue.

Future directions could investigate moderating variables that were suggested by Cumming and colleagues (2005), such as competitive level and sport type. For example, do recreational coaches versus national level coaches use the functions of OL differently based on team or individual sports, or whether the athletes are novice or national level? As well, it would be interesting to investigate who the respondents observe most often to learn skills, strategies, and performance techniques. Identifying whether coaches learn from other coaches within their teams or outside of their teams would be beneficial as coach educators could then direct coaches to these useful resources. Finally, determining whether the use of OL by a coach is a discriminating factor for coaching excellence is also a recommended line of research.

References

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