

The use of reflective practice to support mentoring of elite equestrian coaches

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Abstract

Many equestrian coaches are self employed and receive no formal support for development after completion of their lead body qualification. This study investigated a potential solution to maintain professional enthusiasm and engagement. Three elite coaches were selected through purposive sampling to engage in a distance mentoring scheme, and data collected via interviews and self-reflection. Key results drawn down from emergent themes were sub-divided into four reflective aspects and four mentoring themes. During this process coaches developed a positive cognitive awareness of their own ability facilitating ownership of their practice. Findings suggest the mentoring process supportive and aided development of self-reflection.

Key Words: reflection, mentoring, coaching, distance, equestrian

Introduction

The utility of reflective practice has gained increasing recognition as an effective means of developing personal and professional skills across a range of industries. This includes the area of sports coaching, which has received an increasing amount of research attention highlighting the potential benefits of reflective practice to coach learning and development. However, whilst research has highlighted the importance of reflection as a concept, few studies have investigated specific methods used to implement and enhance reflective practice. This is exacerbated within the unique context of equestrian coaching, in which geographical location, isolation and practitioners' protectiveness over their business interests can be limiting factors to coach development. The current study therefore investigated a novel approach to developing reflective practice within the challenging environment of elite equestrian coaching. A culmination of reflective techniques consisting of mentoring, and written accounts based on reflective models were adopted by a sample of elite equestrian coaches, and their perceptions of these practices were subsequently investigated. The following section presents a review of relevant literature which has informed the aims and methods adopted.

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Reflective practice for sports coaches

According to Schon's seminal (1983) work on the reflective practitioner, reflection is the process that mediates experience and knowledge, therefore making it key to experiential learning. This is particularly pertinent within sports coaching, as research frequently demonstrates that coaches learn by reflecting on practical coaching experience (Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2004; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001), in what is becoming increasingly recognised as a cognitive activity (Cross & Lyle, 1999). Indeed, through reflective learning, practitioners are encouraged to explore their decisions and experiences, enhancing awareness of themselves and their practice (Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004). Moreover, Dewey (1933) declared that reflection is the process of obtaining evidence to support one's knowledge and beliefs, allowing assumptions to be made about future practice. Ultimately then, reflective practice enables coaches to make more informed decisions, which is imperative as coaching has often been conceptualised as a decision-making or problem-solving process in a complex environment (Lyle, 2002). Reflective practice therefore, should be central to the development of equestrian coaches if they are to reach and maintain an elite level of performance.

However, despite the apparent benefits of reflection, details of specific reflective skills and strategies are absent from the literature (Robinson & Kelley, 2007). In fact, Ward and McCotter (2004) contend that reflection, intended to make teaching [coaching] and learning understandable and open, has itself been an invisible process. Moreover, Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie and Nevill (2001) argue that reflective skills will not necessarily develop by simply gaining coaching experience. Therefore, merely spending time in coaching activities is not enough to notably enhance reflective skills (and consequently, coaching practice), and the paucity of research on specific reflective techniques within sports coaching leaves a significant gap in knowledge. This is particularly prevalent within the sports coaching domain which has primarily 'borrowed' reflective models from other disciplines, and therefore lacks understanding of its own reflective processes (Ghaye, Lee & Dixon, 2012). In the context of the current study, elite equestrian coaches were investigated as this population represents some key challenges inherent within the broader issue of coach learning and development.

Challenges within equestrian coaching

Once certified, equestrian coaches are only required to undertake personalised Continuing Professional Development (CPD) once every two years to satisfy professional body requirements (BHS, 2010). With a lack of formal coach education opportunities, more informal practices are adopted to further develop coaching practice. Indeed, the role of the instructor is to facilitate the progression of skills and explore the multifaceted triad (horse / rider /coach) environment, using more personal reflection when working with both the horse and the rider (Lincoln, 2008). By the very nature and culture of this activity in the UK horse riders have become readily skilled at the ability to reflect upon their performance, or more usually the performance of their horse aided by their unique dyad (horse and rider) relationship (Lincoln, 2008). Moreover, many equestrian coaches evolve from being riders (British Horse Society, 2010) so if self reflection was embraced in their riding experiences, these individuals may be advantaged if they subsequently pursue a coaching career, as reflection would not be a novel process for them (Lincoln, 2008). What appears to be a new challenge though is the ability to reflect upon oneself as a coach and take the familiar dyad relationship into a triad environment (rider/coach/mentor) (Lincoln, 2008; British Horse Society, 2009). However, considering the notion that coaches prefer to learn from other coaches (Bell, 1997), this becomes particularly difficult in the equine environment as the majority of equestrian coach education takes place in an unsupervised capacity (British Horse Society, 2009).

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The lack of peer learning opportunities within equestrian coaching is a probable consequence of the geographical distribution of British Horse Society (BHS) coaches. This is further compounded by the fact that the majority of BHS Coaches (Level 3 equivalent coaches) are self employed and work on their own (BHS, 2009) having established their client base. Therefore, coaches may be naturally protective of their commercial interests, resulting in a reluctance to share good practice with others. This can also lead to a feeling of isolation (Knowles, Tyler, Gilbourne, and Eubank, 2006), and an insular and challenging theatre of practice which limits the opportunities for mentoring them (Nash, 2003).

From my personal journey within coaching development there were no structural processes to encourage and motivate development and progression with this sphere of competitive industry. My professional development was achieved through individual self motivation and desire. When undertaking this research it became immediately apparent that the participants were not only enthused by the opportunity to reflect through the use of a third person (mentor) but were inspired by someone else taking an active interest in supporting their own personal career development. This inspired the research idea and therefore, the current study aimed to investigate reflective techniques which could be practical and effective in supporting the development of equestrian coaches.

Mentoring to enhance reflective practice

Considering the insular and protective culture, which pervades elite equestrian coaching, the use of mentors to develop reflective practice for coaches seems an appropriate fit. Indeed, Knowles *et al.* (2001) contend that personal reflection may be limited by our own knowledge and understanding, whereas sharing experiences with others can create a forum for facilitating an interchange of views. Moreover, a mentoring system that is appropriate to the specific sporting discipline has been identified by Bloom, Bush, Schinke and Salmela (1998) as being the most valuable way to develop effective coaching. This is supported by Allan (2007) who reported a range of benefits on a coaching and mentoring programme for secondary school teaching staff. This included an enhanced personal effectiveness, greater reflectivity and professional growth, enhanced energy and job satisfaction, and improved problem solving skills. Furthermore, Jones (2012) discovered myriad benefits for both mentees and mentors resulting from a formal mentoring programme within a UK Healthcare Trust. Specifically, the programme produced successful professional outcomes such as relational job learning, in addition to successful personal outcomes like increased confidence and happiness for both parties.

With specific reference to sports coaching, Nelson and Cushion (2006) state that by having practitioners critically reflect upon coaching experiences, mentors can help trainees become increasingly aware of the dynamics specific to their coaching context, current level of coaching knowledge and individual coaching philosophy, plus how these directly relate to coaching practice. In corroboration, Nelson, Cushion and Potrac (2012) studied the learning preferences and recommendations of 90 coaches across eight sports, including five equestrian coaches. They found that coaches encouraged the implementation of formal mentoring programmes into coach education provision, with some coaches citing mentorship as their preferred learning method. However, some challenges with such an approach were also evident as a lack of appropriate candidates for mentor roles and incompatibility between mentor and mentee were also reported. Nelson *et al.* (2012) therefore call for further research into the complexities of mentoring programmes within sports coaching.

Considering the contextual issues of geographical location, isolation and personal business interests inherent within equestrian coaching, a distance-mentoring programme was implemented within the current study. This involved not only communicating with mentors via telephone conversations but also using written reflections. Hughes, Lee and Chesterfield (2009) contend that sharing written reflections (such as logs or journals) with others (i.e. mentors) allows a wider knowledge base to develop as coaches

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are not restricted by their own knowledge and understanding. Terrion and Pillion (2008) investigated the utility of electronic journals to develop reflective skills within a student peer-mentoring programme. They found that the journal provides the space, in a secure and supportive environment, for mentors to explore their emerging competence through describing their observations, articulating feelings and re-evaluating their experience. The benefits of written reflections have been widely reported; therefore this method was adopted to further enhance the benefits of reflective practice through mentoring.

The utility of written reflections

Whilst very little research on reflective practice has been based in the equestrian environment, Hughes *et al.*'s (2009) study investigated the utility of 'reflective cards' (or R-cards) with a sample of three equestrian coaches. The reflective cards were designed for coaches to note down reflections during coaching practice or 'in-action' to establish a focal point for subsequent, more in-depth reflection. Results suggested that R-cards are a fast, focused, valuable and formal method of reflecting with coaches describing their use as a cognitive activity involving the evaluation of practice. The R-cards also heightened coaches' awareness of reflection and allowed for conscious craft knowledge to be interpreted and internalised.

Supporting the work of Hughes *et al.* (2009), written reflections are considered an integral part of the reflective process (Johns, 1995). Holly (1989) suggests reflective writing enables practice to be explored for analysis and decision-making, and allows the writer to capture reflection in-action, thus providing a means to consciously reflect on tacit practice. Moreover, Riley-Doucet and Wilson (1997) assert that written narratives not only help learners identify areas for improvement and promote planning strategies, but also empower them by giving permission to initiate self-direction. In support, Ledwith (2005) suggests writing provides personal autonomy through trusting spaces where experiences can be shared. Moreover, the efficacy of reflective writing may be explained by the formalisation of thoughts and opinions based on experiences, as opposed to just keeping a mental picture (Russell, 2005).

However, writing may actually be detrimental to reflection as reflective journals can enforce a structure which life does not have, thus fictionalising the life of practitioners (Vazir, 2006). Furthermore, the process of journal writing is generally perceived by coaches as time-consuming (Knowles *et al.*, 2001). Problems with reflective writing can be exacerbated further if required for assessment purposes as individuals may only focus on negative aspects and 'search for problems' on uneventful days (Smith & Jack, 2005). In corroboration, Russell (2005) reported stories of individuals who simply invented experiences in order to complete a reflective task quickly. Hobbs (2007) meanwhile highlights the problematic nature of required reflective practice, in that requiring individuals to be open and honest in the context of assessment may provoke strategic response and often hostility. A review of the literature therefore indicates practitioners 'proceed with caution' when using written reflections, and further research is clearly warranted to better define the benefits of such an approach and personalise the approach to equestrianism.

Offering a different perspective however, Watson and Wilcox (2000) contend that it is the reading of how we represent our practice that allows us to develop a deeper understanding of our experiences. Watson and Wilcox (2000) encourage practitioners to read each other's reflections, thus helping one another by forming 'critical friend' relationships. This research advocates the sharing of written reflections as it appears that although safe and within one's own time, individual reflection can be too narrow with nobody to challenge one's beliefs (Farrell, 2004). Furthermore, when reflecting alone, practitioners are more prone to bias when attempting to reconstruct their practice (Webb, 1999). Therefore coaches sharing written reflections with mentors should be an effective method of reflecting. Indeed, Johns (1995) suggested that a supervisor could provide a supportive environment to develop a

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more critical understanding of a practitioner's own work. From a personal career viewpoint, my inspiration to develop skills and knowledge was led by respect from a coach that I wanted to aspire to follow. This occurred on an informal basis and with reflection I would have developed more quickly if a formal mentoring relationship had been implemented to allow me to access coaches' skills and experiences in a structured manner. The present study built upon these principles and employed the use of written reflections to support the reflective practice within a mentoring programme.

One final facet of reflective practice to be considered here is the incorporation of reflective models, which coaches may employ to promote structured processes (Gibbs, 1988; Johns, 1995), which provide a framework for greater reflective learning (Platzer & Snelling, 1997). Reflective models may encourage a method of understanding that is sufficiently linked to both theory and to the reality of practice (Jackson, 2004). According to Ghaye and Lillyman (2006) such models engage practitioners in a process of knowledge creation by aiding the transition from tacit knowledge to more conscious, explicit knowledge. Furthermore, Knowles, Borrie and Telfer (2005) suggest models which depict the processes of reflection enable coaches to 'know' what it means to reflect. Indeed, Knowles *et al.* (2001) advise that without structure there may be a tendency to simply 'mull over' rather than systematically reflect, with some coaches preferring a structured approach to reflection. Thus the present study incorporated the use of a structured reflective model to provide a supportive framework to written reflections and mentoring. Specifically, Gibbs' (1988) six-staged cyclical model which contains questions designed to increase the practitioner's movement through awareness of feelings, evaluation/analysis, conclusion and formulation of action plan was adapted and utilised.

Through the use of written reflections based on a reflective model, the present study aimed to identify the impact and use of reflection through mentoring support to enhance elite equestrian coach education. The objectives were to evaluate an effective reflective process that could be adapted into the equestrian industry, and appraise the use and role of mentoring within a distance-learning environment for elite equestrian coaches.

Methodology

From my own experiences I felt very isolated once I achieved my professional coaching qualifications and had no further opportunity to advance my skills and competency as a self employed coach. The equine industry lacked any support for my own career development. Through my own research and discussion with coaches in other sports, I became aware of the use of reflection and the potential application of mentoring to meet my personal needs. This inspired me to undertake this research and investigate if there was potential to utilise the reflective Q cards as used by Hughes *et al.* (2009), combined with mentoring (Knowles *et al.* 2001) in order to support the development of elite equestrian coaches.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was undertaken with a single instructor of comparable teaching experience to those used within the final study to inform reflective record sheet design for equestrian practice.

The use of reflective triggers that support reflection 'in' and 'after' action (Hughes *et al.*, 2009), encourage a structure that compliments the Gibbs (1988) model of reflection. Hughes *et al.* (2009) designed reflective cards to be incorporated into practice within an equestrian environment that allowed the coaches to quickly reflect upon their practice. A reflective practice sheet was designed by the researcher that brought together Gibbs's (1988) model and the use of Hughes *et al.*'s (2009) reflective cards into an applied equestrian environment. The sheet supported Hughes *et al.*'s (2009) five

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competencies (decision making, judgement, communication, team-working and observation) and an adjustment of Gibbs (1988) work utilising UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC) equestrian terminology. Using feedback from this activity the reflective sheet was adapted for the use in the study as a forum to record the participant's own reflection and as a repository for this reflection in subsequent discussion within the mentoring telephone dialogues (Figure 1).

Reflective Practice Record Sheet				
Date:	Number:	Coach: BJ		
Judgement	Decision making	Communication	Observation	Teamworking
•	Assessment of the training event: <i>What were the training aims and were they met for either the horse and / or rider?</i>			
•	Feelings:	<i>As a coach how did you feel about the session and what was the impact upon the delivery to the rider/ horse? What did you think?</i>		
•	Evaluation:	<i>Was this progression or consolidation?</i>		
•	Analysis:	<i>Were the Aims met? If Yes – how did this happen, what did you do well? If No, why not – safety, what was the limiting factors?</i>		
•	Conclusion:	<i>Relate the achievement to the Aims of the rider. How else could this outcome have been achieved?</i>		
•	Action Plan:	<i>Would this session be repeatable because it was Good / Structured? What added value could be brought to future sessions?</i>		

Figure 1: Reflective record sheet – researchers own design adapted from Gibbs (1988) and Hughes et al. (2009).

Participants

The principles of purposive sampling were implemented (Patton, 2002), the consequence of which enabled three female equestrian coaches to be selected, informed of the nature of the research and invited to participate. It was felt that all of the participants should be female within such a small data set to mimic the prevalence of female coaches within this industry (BHS, 2009), with a pre-requisite that they currently trained riders for a minimum of 20 hours per week (BHS, 2010) (Table 1) A signed consent form was completed prior to the start of the study by each person. Participants were numbered to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Participant number	Age	Coaching qualifications	Number of years coaching	Number of Years held BHS I (equivalent level 6)
1	56	BHS Coaches, BHS and UKCC Level Three Assessors - undertaken some form of CPD within the last two years	42	34
2	52		38	28
3	42		25	4

Table 1: Overview of coach participant experience

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Procedure

An initial telephone interview was conducted to explain the purpose of the study and the level of commitment that was expected from each of the participants. The telephone dialogue was identified as the opportunity for the participants to discuss with the researcher their personal development and utilise the conversation as support within a mentoring capacity. The data collection format was outlined, explaining the weekly-recorded telephone dialogues. For each of the telephone conversations a series of pre-written questions was used to ascertain each of the participant's knowledge and use of reflection prior to the start of the data collection. The data collections were carried out over a four-week period due to the availability of the participants. Telephone interviews were pre-arranged to provide weekly support within a mentoring capacity to each of the participants.

At the end of the four-week data collection period, all three participants met to discuss their personal experiences during the research period as a focus group. During this period the content and direction of the focus group was directed using myself as the mentor (Oppenheim, 1992).

Data Analysis

All the telephone and focus group interviews were transcribed *verbatim*. Initially repetitive reading of the transcripts allowed the researcher to develop familiarity with the data. The initial phase enabled a comprehensive examination of the transcriptions on a sentence-by-sentence basis and sometimes word-by-word basis as supported by Strauss and Corbin (1997) through the identification of repetitive words or phrases. Due to the nature of the research both inductive and deductive content analysis was employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Data analysis progressed from an inductive phase where new themes were drawn down from the transcribed interviews utilising the approach prescribed by Gibbs (1988) and Hughes et al. (2009). A deductive phase followed where themes were organised into categories (Patton, 2002). After initial grouping of the raw-data themes, further categories were drawn down from higher order themes and ultimately formed emergent themes; these were generated from a crossover of data trends and existing literature (Hughes et al., 2009). To sustain the development of the raw data themes, direct quotations were used from both the individual conversations and the focus group; this enhanced the clarification of some viewpoints within the emergent themes and supported ease of interpretation to the researcher and the reader. On completion of the ordering of the themes, all the transcripts were re-read to ensure comprehensive inclusion of data and allow for a valid representation of the participants' viewpoints.

Results

The results were sub divided into two sections: reflective practice work generated from the participants and identification of emergent themes that developed through the mentoring support offered by the researcher to the participants.

Reflective Results

Analysis of the telephone transcripts was undertaken producing five periods of data collection (introduction, week one, two, three and four). The content analysis produced 17 raw data themes (Figure 2). From these themes nine higher order themes were drawn down and from this the four emergent themes developed. Each of these four emergent themes (conscious awareness, image as a professional, the benefit to self and the practical use of reflective sheets) were appraised and evaluated in a sequential manner to elucidate the viewpoint derived from this study.

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The completion of the sheets allowed for a formalisation of the process that became a disciplined attitude, which was favoured positively by all of the participants. The development of the participants' self awareness within the study appeared to increase over time to heighten their consciousness perception and awareness of their experiences and skills, metamorphosing their tacit knowledge into explicit competency of their own coaching ability

Yes subconsciously I think I was reflective but I didn't realize (consciously) that I was so good at it

All three coaches taught in commercial environments and stated that through their own reflective development there was a change in their own perception of their image as a professional coach. The coaches' thought that there was a need to be commercial in the delivery of their sessions, this combined with the awareness of how they acted in a client-facing environment, resulted in a conscious awareness of a change in their practice. Participant 1 noted that:

It's a form of profession to me – it is so ingrained in to me (I am now aware) that I think yes I just walk in and interact, they are paying money and they're paying money to have a professional whatever has been going on in my personal life they wouldn't have a clue about it. I tend to have a style of coaching and teaching that isn't that personal.

Much of the reflective process lead to a development of the coaches' understanding of their experience and a direct benefit to their own career, this appeared to become enhanced through a greater depth of thinking throughout the taught sessions, thus improving their ability and confidence to make personal evaluations based on both negative and positive events, but reflected as positive experiences. Participant 3 noted:

(My prior perception of) Reflection tended to be negative if you use it whereas this paperwork and this whole process helps (positive reflection), well helped me, to be more open and more positive.

All of the participants found the practical use of the paperwork user friendly and commented on it being easy to access and work with. The reflective study and mentoring sessions developed a disciplined approach to the completion of the practically applied sheets. Completion of the sheets was determined by the individual's work patterns and the availability of a suitable quiet time to reflect, so it generally occurred after the teaching day or midday for participant three who solely worked in an employed capacity and had organised lunch breaks. The second section contained only the focus group transcript, which detailed the perceptions and preferences for mentoring. The content analysis produced 14 raw data themes (Figure 2).

Mentoring Results

During the opportunity for the focus group to meet it became apparent that the coaches felt that they could be isolated in their practice and unable to share good practice in their work. Through the mentoring support they became more inspired and creative (refreshed) as commented by participant 1;

We all teach in our own aquarium, we're not mentored or supervised or anything. No body actually mentors our coaching process and so we have to be self-mentoring and it's (conscious reflection) quite a good tool for that.

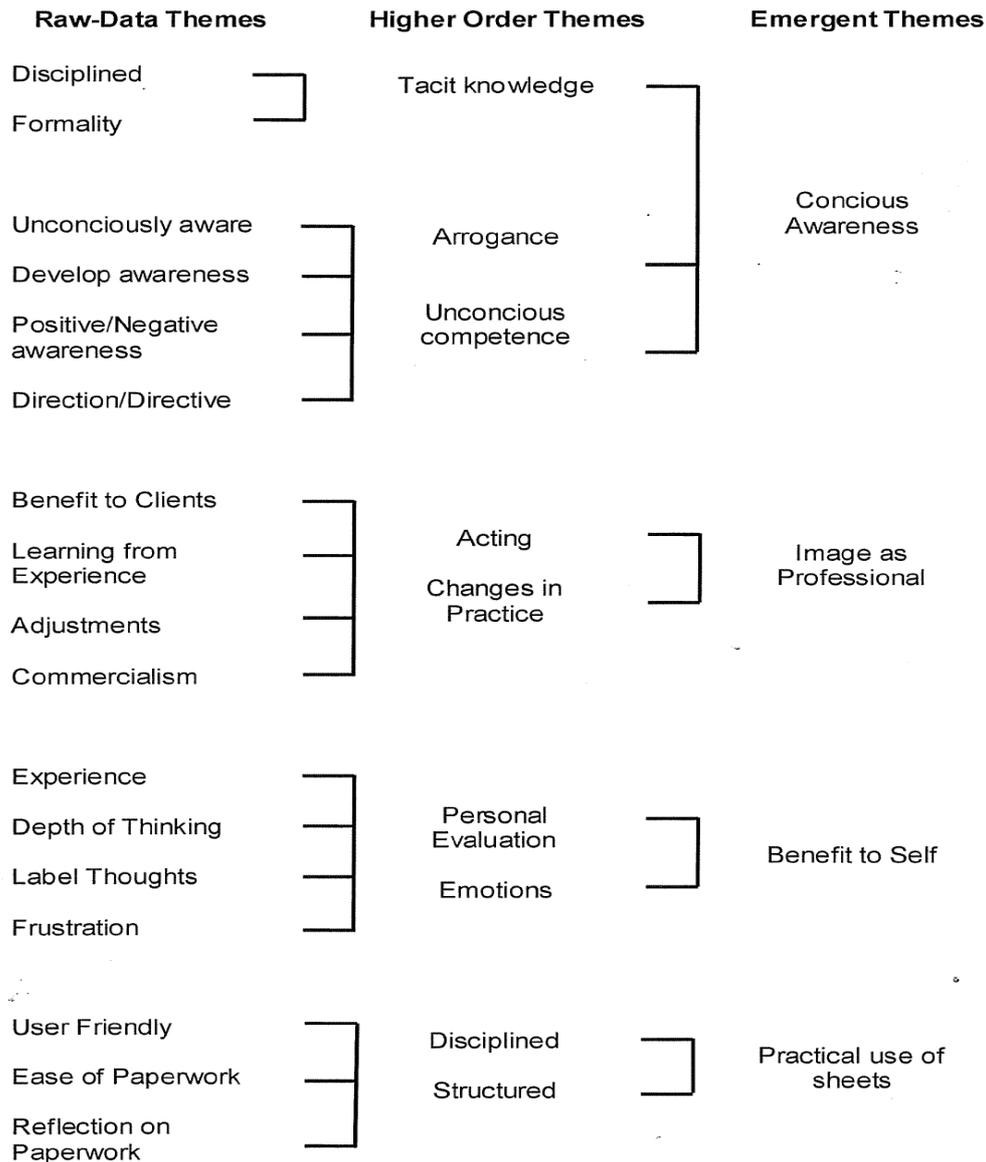


Figure 2: Participants, perceptions and reflective emergent themes

The mentoring process appeared to enhance the personal confidence of all of the coaches; they felt and became aware that they liked being in control of their teaching sessions. Subsequently they became aware that in many of the instances where they felt frustrated it was due to extrinsic factors that were out of their control and therefore not reflective upon their teaching competency. Participant 1 reflected that:

Most of mine (coaching practice) was good, but it was interesting that I had two (clients) that were negative and then it was really interesting that I had to decide / find why they were negative ... basically somebody else had inflicted what they wanted me to work with their horse and do something that I didn't feel was relevant or appropriate to the horse and I was having to go along a path that I didn't want to go along

All of the participants agreed that this led to a feeling of arrogance, but in the sense of security of their professional ability. The sense of being secure in their own teaching and reflection, combined with a positive sense of arrogance developed greater confidence in themselves.

All of the participants liked the feeling of taking ownership over their sessions, some of this was at a sub-conscious level but through the mentoring process they became more aware of their preference for this ownership. The consequence to the participants buying into their own progress allowed them to take ownership of the process and through that develop an unconscious competence that the mentor was able to extract as a positive conscious competence through the individual weekly sessions, in effect the commencement of self-mentoring. Participant 1 considered that:

I think it (realisation of being good) inspires me more and makes me more enthusiastic because obviously at my level I don't get very much observation and feedback on my coaching from everyone else as I am the one doing it for everybody. I can only, with self reflection think it's the way of progressing and mentoring oneself.

The scheduled weekly interviews were welcomed and perceived as being non-invasive and supportive as they were led by the participant's needs. Discussion on the duration of the research study elucidated that a four-week process with weekly dialogue was ample. The time frame was sufficient to allow the participants to reflect upon their mentored discussion and then apply their thoughts and actions into the following week's teaching. By allowing the participants to select which taught sessions that they wished to write up encouraged ownership of the reflective process.

Discussion

The study was designed to merge both reflection and mentoring in coach education. By using this amalgamation of teaching skills it is envisaged that a proposal can be produced to develop a working document that can be applied into practice within the BHS coaching system. Such a document would benefit the isolated coach (through geographical location) or the coach that is self employed and needs to feel that they have to protect their business and consequently struggles with asking for supportive dialogue.

In the study it became evident that the coaches developed a conscious awareness that they naturally engaged in the process of self-reflection initially at an unconscious level but then, through utilisation of the reflective sheets and mentoring guidance, they became consciously competent. In line with this, the disciplined approach noted by Hughes et al. (2009) found that the coaches became disciplined in their noticing whilst in action. The present study elucidated that the coaches were naturally diligent in the completion of the reflective sheets, encompassing it into their daily routines, they all liked the formality of completing the sheets and the ability for the evidence gathered to make them self awareness of their natural skills within the headings.

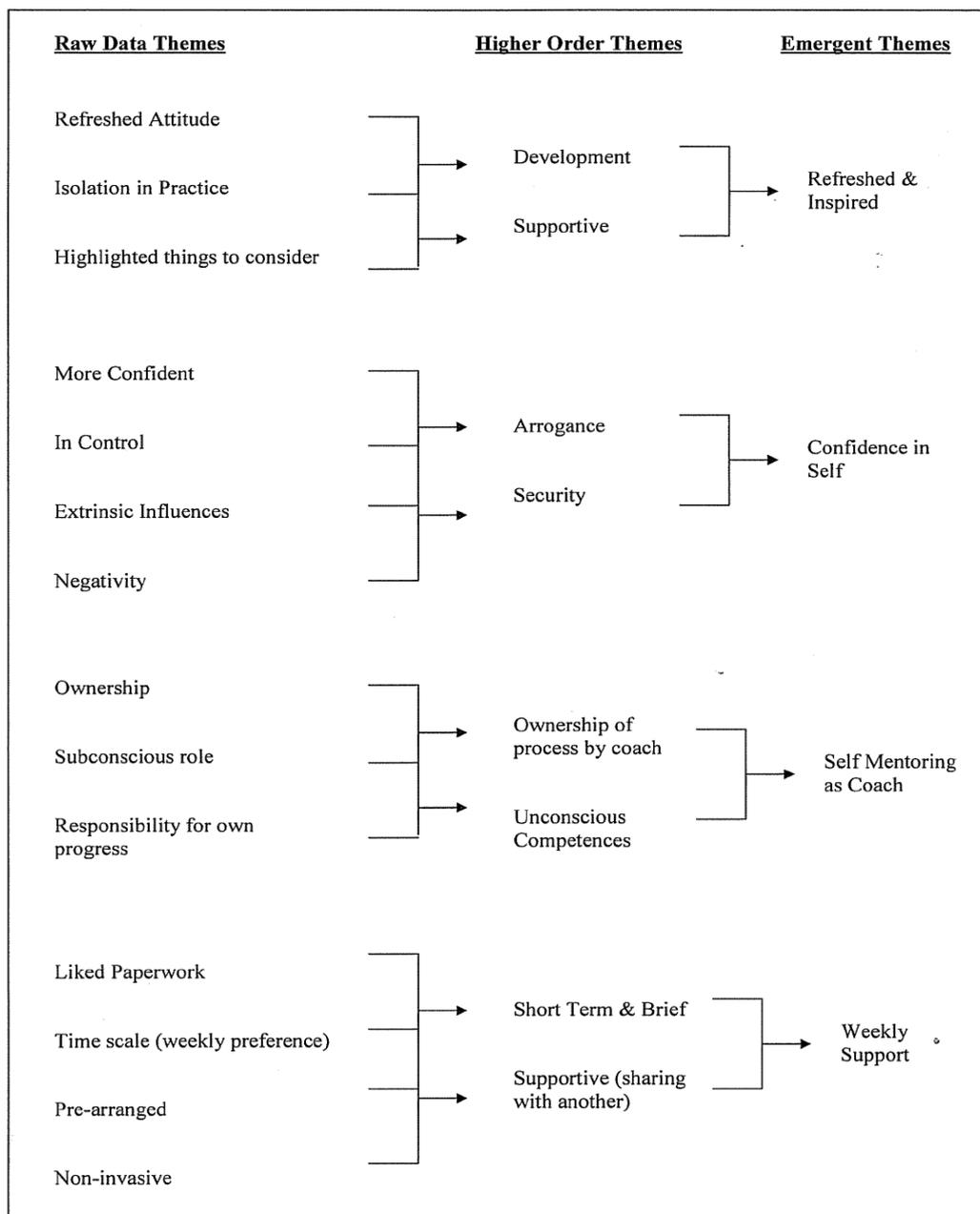


Figure 3: Mentoring emergent themes

The development of the participants' conscious strengths concurs with Nash's (2006) work on tacit knowledge. This study highlighted that expert coaches do not always know, through a cognitive process, how to explain their actions. The collective viewpoint expressed by the coaches that they developed a conscious awareness of their ability to teach and deliver to a good or consistent level was evident as they progressed throughout the study. Initially, the individuals' identification of negative sessions was seen as poor performance. Participant one noted that 'extrinsic motivation' influenced her ability to manage the teaching environment, which resulted in a perceived negative training session. Through positive

reflection after the event she understood the impact of external factors resulted in a perceived lack of control and her pessimistic emotions. By the participant appreciating through self-reflection the positive and negative influences with this situation she travelled through a stage of unconscious competence to one of conscious awareness. The development of this participant's positive self reflection appeared to have arisen through some mentoring guidance, but in addition her own ability to take ownership of her delivery skills and advance them positively through her desire to self reflect and potentially self mentor (Bradbury, 2000).

The individual coaches developed a greater awareness of their own image as a professional within this environment, such personal perception is in contrast to the suggestions made by Cushion (in-press) that coaches have problems describing their own behaviour which may negatively impact on the ability to self-reflect and subsequent develop experiential learning to evaluate what skills are utilised in the strategic application of empowering a player / athlete (Cushion et al., 2003). In contrast, their athletes are able to precisely describe coach behaviour (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Investigation of an empowered player / athlete may be a more successful process to facilitate the transfer of a power base and development of coaching prowess (Kidman, 2002).

Within this study the findings concluded that coaches require the ability to reflect and feel positive about their ability to teach in order to self advance, thus establishing a benefit to themselves. The current study found that the participants were able to use communication positively in order to develop other weaker areas and as such broaden their knowledge. The combination of Hughes et al. (2009) r-cards and the reflective sheets used in their study identified that communication was a key skill that the participants felt completely confident with. More research in the area of emotional influences on coach behaviour is required before further useful application of these results can be determined and comparisons can be drawn.

Research has identified that reflection can lead to an empowerment of the individual, self-awareness and the ability to implement change (Kidman, 2002). It is postulated that these are important skills for the equestrian instructor due to their isolation of their working environment and personal growth as a coach. The participants of the current study highlighted these concerns within the focus group, when they were able to debate the use and educational value of the study within the contact of coach education. Further research could be conducted in this area to evaluate the implications of these findings.

All participants commented that the practical use of the paperwork supported a disciplined approach and the need to be self-responsible for their own progression; this contrasts to Knowles et al., (2006) who found that within the isolated context of self-coaching (and indeed equestrian teaching), there was a lack of accountability to one's self and therefore the perceived need to reflect. The ability to produce a document that acts as a diary of events, both physically, emotionally and a guidance sheet for progression would be a valuable tool for the instructor who may be isolated in practice (BHS, 2010).

Mentoring

Feeling refreshed and inspired is worthy of discussion as part of this instructor's role is to educate equestrian coaches as a Coach Educator, participant one knew that this is what should happen in practice but had not been in a position prior to this study to apply it to her own teaching practice. Through the weekly discussions with the mentor it was felt that this gave an opportunity to highlight additional things for her to consider over the next week. Such discussions and opportunities were considered to be supportive and developmental in the process of reflection but also through the opportunity to develop themselves as reflective and inspired people.

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The coaches stated that through the process of self-reflection they became more confident in themselves and what they were actually doing whilst teaching. Due to the unpredictable nature of working with horses, recommendations would be made to develop this awareness through reflective practice and the ability to self-reflect within any session that did not go well. Through the reflective process and mentoring their awareness of the causes of their negative emotions came to light resulting in a cognitive understanding of what they could and could not influence. Initially the feeling of control and confidence were expressed as arrogance. Once the coaches became aware of what they could and could not change within the environment, the rider or the horse, they became more confident in themselves in offering solutions to the problems, similar to the concepts of PBL (Jones & Turner, 2006; Hagemann et al., 2007). Knowledge gained established a sense of security about their performance and this fed into the positivity of developing their own confidence in themselves, through having understood their behaviour and improving their cognitive awareness (Beck, 1975).

The emergent themes that have been expressed by the participants show some commonality in their lower order to both reflection and mentoring. In reflection to this and as quoted by one of the participants the whole process has potentially opened up the opportunity to develop not only a self-reflective process and awareness but also the opportunity for self mentoring. Such an important statement is worthy of further investigation to support the freelance coach in their ability to refresh and be inspired to continue to seek improvement in their self as well as the cascading effect that this will have to their client base. If the instructor has a feeling of being in control, then they are able to make better decisions and through this awareness reflect throughout the entire teaching process (Nash, 2003; Hughes et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2009). These literature sources would support the options from the coaches' focus group discussion that to advance the reflective process they would be willing to ask their clients to reflect upon their own performance, providing feedback to the coaches as a component of a self-mentoring process.

All of the participants claimed that they liked the paperwork; this is in direct contrast to other literature (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002; Jones et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2009). Further investigation is warranted within the equestrian community to ascertain if this is a biased preference or one that is an anomaly within this sporting culture. The participants all stated in the focus group discussion that they were happy with the duration of the study, and felt it was long enough (four weeks) and the mentor provided suitable support through the weekly dialogues. Although all participants felt that this was a non-invasive process due to the time and date being pre-arranged, it was still undertaken out of their working day. In view of the literature (Nash, 2003; Hughes et al., 2009) and through consideration of the specific equestrian environment from the current study, the time preference of the full time coaches should be taken into consideration if future mentoring support is to be offered within this industry.

Utilising the experiences of these elite coaches could provide the opportunity to provide mentoring opportunities for those at the levels below them. Through the discussion within the focus group, all participants would be prepared to offer the same mentoring guidance that they received through this study. Developing a top down approach would allow the cascade and dissemination of good practice to be available to others providing there was the perceived need by the less senior coaches in this environment. Immediate problems for producing such an opportunity may be the perceived cost of time to all individuals (providing and receiving mentoring), despite the comments received by the participants that this was not a concern in this study and not a barrier to equestrian coach development.

Those coaches who wished to engage in personal development through such a process may be similar to the participants used in the study in as much as by agreement to participate, they are actively wishing the engage in their development and education. If a volunteer culture could be established to attract those who wish to advance their skills, this could be established then the potential barriers will be

reduced. Other barriers that must be addressed include the selection and role of the mentor. It was noted by all the participants that the mentor needed to be “liked” in order for them to openly share their reflections and feelings without prejudice. Whilst a ‘liked’ person is their preference, a mentor must also be competent in that role to offer suitable guidance and support (Lough, 2001; Nash, 2003; Hughes et al., 2009).

Self reflection on the study

Within the data analysis it would have been preferable to utilise research triangulation, which is a form of credibility within ‘trustworthiness’ criteria as supported by Lincoln & Guba (1985). Research triangulation would have been best utilised by the researcher as an equestrian professional, a post graduate researcher who was familiar with qualitative research techniques and an accredited sports psychologist who can support the reflective nature of this study area. By the utilisation of three people’s viewpoint any bias to study and emergent themes would be neutralised and would ensure a high level of ‘dependability’ (Knowles et al., 2006).

The data collection period was generated over a four-week period. A six to eight week time period would have been preferable, as noted by Nash (2003) who suggested that this is an efficient amount of time to measure the effectiveness of an intervention. The sample size used was narrow (three females) and specialised (elite coaches), to improve the study viability a greater range of participants (male and female), age range, skills-set (novice to elite) and geographical location should be considered. All participants were known to the researcher, which was commented as a positive experience by the participants within the mentoring element of the study. To remove bias and personal conflict the ‘liked’ mentor should not be part of the authorship but a third party would be recommended to be employed to facilitate non-bias.

It would be considered beneficial to evaluate the participants’ understanding of reflection through detailed scrutiny of the personal reflective sheets, which was beyond the scope of this current study. Through assessment of the individual’s understanding and manner of completion of the form there may come to light greater comprehension of their self- reflection and the benefit of the sheets as a record or diary of the past training sessions and their behaviour, feelings and performance.

Conclusion

The participants positively bought into the study and readily engaged in the reflective process. During this process the coaches stated that they developed a positive cognitive awareness at a conscious level of their own ability, which allowed them to take responsibility for their learning and ownership of their teaching skills. The coaches considered that the mentoring process was supportive and useful in developing the ability to self-reflect through the weekly dialogues. Consequently, this led to their ability to self-mentor suggesting it is a suitable tool for CPD in this unique industry. The study process was shown to be very accessible to coaches in potentially isolated areas or those working in a freelance capacity where commercial ownership of teaching skills is important and protected. To the author’s knowledge this is the first study to amalgamate reflection and mentoring in practice that is specific, to this industry.

In order to support the development of current equestrian coaches within the UK, the opportunity for available and interactive support for professional coaches should be provided to ensure that they could feel valued. Through their own education, the coaches can cascade and disseminate their tacit knowledge to their protégés, and support future coach development and education within this theatre of practice. The work done in this study, and the understanding of the limitations that have been identified, have been

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embraced positively as a pilot study, and are being implemented at Instructor level by the BHS Coach Education system for 2012. This study concluded that both a reflective element and a mentoring process are required to effectively empower equestrian coaches and facilitate a culture of lifelong learning.

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