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Exploring biographical learning in elite soccer coaching

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Qualified and skilled sport coaches are vital to the development of sport in general and of elite sport in particular. Research suggests that the development of coaching expertise in elite sport is a complex matter involving mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations. However, it is less clear to what extent and in which ways these learning situations are woven together in the coaches’ learning paths. In other words, what is the ‘gluey’ link between these learning situations and the coach’s idea of what constitutes expertise in coaching? The aim of this paper is to respond to this question by exploring the learning paths and learning situations of elite sport coaches from a biographical learning perspective. A micro-sociological cross-case analysis of qualitative research interviews with eight Danish elite soccer coaches about their pathways to coaching expertise laid the foundation for three insights. Firstly, an autopoietic (i.e. self-creative and self-organizing) resource more or less intentionally and deliberately pervades the thoughts and actions of coaches as they reinterpret what they learned in any given situation. The term breathing spaces may describe the process whereby the coaches’ biographicity pervades and oxidises their sense of expertise and personal style. Secondly, important face-to-face interactions and dialogues with other coaches seem to portray a coach’s learning paths and experience of coaching expertise. Thirdly, more nuanced descriptions of a coach’s learning situations interweaving mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations may be fruitful to future studies of coaches’ learning paths. It is suggested that future coach educations might incorporate an approach that favours the coaches’ biographical learning and development of expertise as personal journeys in authentic learning situations, an encouragement to create breathing spaces in the coach’s professional life and assistance in learning from them.

Keywords: Coaching expertise; Coach education; Biographical learning; Elite sport; Mediated; Unmediated and internal learning situations; Biographicity

Introduction

Qualified and skilled sport coaches are vital to the development of sport in general and elite sport in particular (Côté et al., 2007). Coaching high-performance athletes is a multifaceted job calling for a variety of competences in the elite sport coach. These include setting up training regimes grounded in deliberate practice, allowing athletes appropriate mental and physical rest, preparing athletes for consistent high-level competitive performance, teaching and assessing physical, technical, perceptual

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and mental skills in a safe environment and providing opportunities for athletes to prepare for ‘life after sport’ (Côté & Gilbert, 2009, p. 317). These key competences and areas of expertise all relate to the coach–athlete relationship, in which the coach is often regarded as the expert, that is, the owner of adequate knowledge, power and sport-specific expertise. On the basis of what are regarded as critical pedagogical and interactive sociological paradigms, Jones (2007) provided a micro-interactive perspective on coaching and coach training. He went so far as to argue that every single aspect of the complex profession of an elite sport coach is about ‘the minutiae of the social and endlessly unpredictable pedagogical coach–athlete relationship’ (Jones, 2007, p. 159). More important, Jones suggested that learning to be a coach appears to be an everyday pedagogical endeavour and a lifelong project, both within and outside the scope of coach education programmes. Jones’ stance on coaching practice and coach education has prompted this paper to explore the learning paths and learning situations of elite sport coaches on the basis of a biographical perspective on learning—that is, the perspective of the coaches’ lifelong learning through a multitude of different learning situations in which the biography of coach comes into play.

In recent years a growing body of studies has emerged focusing on learning processes and on the development of expertise in elite sport coaches (Jones et al., 2003; Christensen, 2009; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Mallett et al., 2009; Potrac & Jones, 2009a; Young et al., 2009; Chesterfield et al., 2010; Roberts, 2010). The development of coaching expertise is a complex matter involving both formal and informal methods of learning (Nash & Collins, 2006; Nash & Sproule, 2009), qualitatively different learning situations (Werthner & Trudel, 2006; Werthner & Trudel, 2009) and a wide range of learning contexts (Mallett et al., 2009; Rynne et al., 2010). Elite coaches’ life stories and pathways to expertise are described as ‘messy, fragmented and endlessly fascinating’ (Jones et al., 2004) and ‘they demonstrate a need to understand the interconnections between coaches’ lives and their professional practice’ (Jones et al., 2004, p. 1). Even if elite sport has become increasingly professionalized, the developmental pathways of the coach differ widely both in the breadth of areas covered and in the extent of their experience (Erickson et al., 2007, 2008), and may therefore be characterized as ‘idiosyncratic learning paths’ (Werthner & Trudel, 2009). To better describe the idiosyncratic learning paths of coaches, Werthner and Trudel (2006, 2009) used an analytical distinction between three learning situations: (1) mediated learning situations characterized by the imperative presence of instructors, textbooks and drills (e.g. coaching courses and formal coach education), (2) unmediated learning situations characterized by the absence of instructors while the learner takes initiative and responsibility for choosing what to learn (e.g. discussions among peers, informal coach education and workplace supervision) and (3) internal learning situations where the learner is not exposed to new things, but rather reinterpret ‘existing ideas in his/her cognitive structure’ (Werthner & Trudel, 2009, p. 437). Using this constructivist view of learning, the authors provided a systematic way of exploring the pragmatic conditions of coaches’ learning paths that led to expertise. However, it was less
clear to what extent and in what way these three learning situations overlap, intertwine or meld in the coaches’ experiences of expertise. In other words, what is the ‘gluey’ link between these learning situations and the coach’s idea of what constitutes expertise in coaching? How can we understand the way in which an elite sport coach makes sense of the multitude of different learning situations throughout his/her lifelong learning as a coach?

One possible response to these questions might be the so-called biographical learning (Alheit & Dausien, 1999) of the coach—that is, the ways in which a person’s biography both structures and is structured by that person’s learning processes. The aim of this paper is to respond to the above questions by exploring the learning paths of elite sport coaches from a combined perspective. To be precise I take point of departure in micro-sociological analysis of the coaches’ mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations (Werthner & Trudel, 2006) and subsequently critically relate the produced insights to the perspective of biographical learning (Alheit & Dausien, 1999, 2002). In the pragmatic combination of these constructivist and constructionist perspectives, I intent to provide new insights into elite sport coaches’ experiences of being involved in and making sense of a multitude of different learning situations. In this way, I frame the study of the coaches’ learning paths as a matter of the distinction between ‘situation’ (the constructivist perspective) and ‘process’ (the constructionist perspective). The distinction between learning situations and learning processes is useful because it suggests that ‘situations’ need to be understood as a part of a wider social process and may not be sufficient to capture coach learning. I base the paper on qualitative interviews with eight Danish elite soccer coaches about their pathways to coaching expertise.

Learning to have a sense of coaching expertise

According to sociological studies on coaching (Cushion & Jones, 2001; Jones et al., 2003; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Jones, 2007; Mallett et al., 2009; Rynne et al., 2010), the development of coaching expertise is socially constructed and thus interwoven in the social structures of the specific sports context in which the coach is learning and practising coaching. For example, in a Bourdieu-inspired study on elite soccer coaches, Christensen (2009) showed that the coaches’ expertise in identifying talented and less talented soccer players rests on experience-based, incorporated ‘practical sense’ and ‘classificatory schemes’ (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998) that are actualized through the socially instituted power of the elite soccer coaches (Christensen, 2009).

Likewise, Potrac and Jones (2009b) portrayed coaching as ‘a personal, power-ridden, everyday pursuit’ (p. 223) where the coaches’ management of micro-relations with other agents (for example, athletes and other coaches) form the most important aspect of their practice. This representation of coaching is also found in a study on coaches’ perceptions of an advanced level coach education programme (Chesterfield et al., 2010). Chesterfield et al. (2010) indicated that the coaches were
critical of what they considered to be the “one size fits all” approach to coaching provided on the course’ (p. 311), and the authors thus concluded that coach education is a negotiated and contested activity. Also, Werthner and Trudel (2009) found that previous learning and experience influence what coaches choose to pay attention to and therefore choose to learn. In a study of coaches’ preferred learning situations, Nash and Sproule (2009) concluded that expert coaches considered their informal networks, mentoring and observation other coaches to be of considerable benefit to their development of expertise. Recent sociological research on coaching accentuates the importance of being aware of the ‘person behind the profession’ and of the apparent personification and idiosyncratization of coaching expertise, which seems to characterize sports coaching cultures. Simultaneously, the very same research has pointed at elite sport coaches’ use of what Bourdieu (1998) called a socially constructed practical sense in their daily work and at the social-constructed dispositions of coaching expertise. In this respect, the development of expertise in elite sport coaches appears to reflect the meta-theoretical dilemma of agency versus structure as well as one of the basic paradoxes of adult learning (Jarvis, 1992), namely that learning is individually experienced by the learner (in this study: the coach) as a biographical matter and yet it is highly influenced and facilitated by a multitude of socio-cultural patterns. This interesting paradox in coaches’ learning and development of expertise may be elucidated by combining Werthner and Trudel’s constructivist view on coaches’ learning with the constructionist notion of ‘biographicity’ and biographical learning (Alheit & Dausien, 1999; Alheit, 2009). Since some readers may not be familiar with the concepts of biographicity and biographical learning, I shall offer a short introduction in the next section of the paper.

‘Biographicity’ and biographical learning

Biographical learning refers to the ways in which a person’s biography (or life history) both structures and is structured by that person’s learning processes. Biographical learning processes are often characterized by communicative situations in which learners and teachers (or other persons) meet in biographically oriented activities, dialogues or learning environments. There does not seem to be an agreed-on definition of biographical learning, yet two influential authors in the field of biographical learning, Alheit and Dausien (1999, 2002), suggested the following definition:

If we conceive of biographical learning as a self-willed, “autopoietic” accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively “organise” their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions, it becomes possible to comprehend education and learning both as individual identity work and as the “formation” of collective processes and social relations. (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17)
According to Alheit (Alheit & Dausien, 1999), there are three symptoms that relate to the current change in the conditions of adult learning, prompting the rebuilding of action environments (i.e. educational programmes, institutions, workplaces, etc.) and calling for a policy approach based on learning that will be radically different from that based on education and training. These are (1) an erosion of traditional lifeworlds that confronts coaches with uncertainty about their tacit knowledge and inherited ways of doing things, (2) a breakdown of classical milieus that challenges the traditional classroom-and-textbook (and pitch-and-drills) way of organizing coach training programmes and (3) the disappearance of ‘normal’ life-course scripts, which leaves coaches with free hands to construct their own scripts, their own pathways and ultimately their own biographies. One strategy for addressing these changes may be to devote greater attention to the biographicity of the learner:

Biographicity means that we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as shapeable and designable (Alheit, 1995, p. 65).

First, the term biographicity is the theoretical concept that identifies the social principle of the formation of the individuals’ experience. It addresses a self-reflexive temporal structure, which is bound to the bodily based individual in the span of his/her life. Second, biographicity is also an educational idea that describes an ‘inner’ potential of the learner, a sort of autopoietic (self-creating) resource for coping with or ‘taking in’ current reality and as such an individual knowledge resource to deal with bodily and social symptoms related to the modern reality. The basic assumption in the following is that biographicity pervades the coaches’ involvement in various learning situations to varying degrees. Furthermore, I assume that the way in which an elite sport coach makes sense of the multitude of learning situations encountered throughout his/her lifelong learning can be studied by considering the use of a biographical gaze at what Werthner and Trudel called mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations.

**Methods**

The empirical basis of the study was a micro-sociological and constructivist analysis of qualitative research interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) focusing on coaches’ stories about their learning and development of expertise. I chose this approach because of its sensitivity to narratives and to descriptions of the categories and individual preferences the coaches adopted in their learning processes. Telling tales and recounting anecdotes are a fundamental human way of giving meaning to experience (Garro & Mattingly, 2000; Christensen, 2007), because the narrative functions as the mediator between subjectivity and an outer world of actions and objective structures. When individuals speak about their lives, they do so with the aid of explanatory models or narratives that are legitimate in their culture (Järvinen, 2000). In this way, insights into the narratives and biographies of the coaches allow for an understanding of their way of structuring their experiences and provide a
cohesive picture of the different practicalities and limitations that construct their coaching practice (Jones et al., 2003).

Participants

The participants were eight male Danish national youth team (NYT) soccer coaches, who were selected according to two criteria. First, coaches had to be appointed by the Danish Soccer Association (in Danish: DBU). It is assumed that this appointment meant they were best qualified to coach male Danish soccer talents for the Danish national youth soccer team. However, it can be presumed that the DBU system is not always functionally meritocratic and that, as in many other social fields (Bourdieu, 1990), DBU is based partly on power relations. Second, the study had to include both coaches involved in the NYT (NYT coaches) and those working with national talent development (NTD coaches) to include all manner of coaches affiliated to the NYTs. NTD coaches were appointed to arrange individual training and career guidance for the players in their respective clubs as well as assisting both NYT coaches, the leading professional soccer clubs and head coaches in their work (for instance, planning and implementing training sessions, decision-making regarding selection of players and individual testing and feedback).

At the time of the interview, the coaches were between 33 and 64 years old (mean = 45 years) and had between 8 and 28 years of experience (mean = 15 years) in coaching high performance athletes in elite soccer. Detailed information regarding the participants is given in Table 1.

Data collection

The coaches received a letter with an invitation to take part in a qualitative research interview. Soon after, I contacted the coaches by telephone and we made an appointment for the time and location of the interview. All eight coaches agreed to participate. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview script (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) that consisted of thematic questions pertaining to the connection between coaching practice, coaching expertise and the learning paths of the coaches. To prepare them for the interview and to give them the option of asking preparatory questions, the coaches received the interview script a week before the appointment.

The methodological approach was based on the phenomenological premise that the initial interview data must be ‘biographical and personal because all human phenomena are temporal, historical, and personal’ (Giorgi, 1975, p. 101). Consequently, the qualitative interviews focused on the production of narratives (Mattingly, 1998) that involved concrete examples of people, anecdotes, learning situations, dilemmas and decisions that had been important for the coach’s self-understanding and development of expertise. The participants’ narratives and their spontaneous wish to talk about subjects that interested them within the framework of the interview script
Table 1. Expert coaches participating in qualitative research interviews \((n = 8)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>NYT coach or NTD coach</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in coaching national elite soccer</th>
<th>Coaching certificate</th>
<th>Educational qualification</th>
<th>Former elite soccer player</th>
<th>Location of the interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Axel</td>
<td>NTD coach</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>&gt; 20</td>
<td>UEFA A</td>
<td>Teacher education</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Soccer club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>NTD coach</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>&gt; 8</td>
<td>National coach education</td>
<td>Bachelor (Sport)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Soccer club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curt</td>
<td>NTD coach</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>&gt; 12</td>
<td>National coach education</td>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Soccer club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>NTD coach</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>&gt; 11</td>
<td>UEFA A</td>
<td>Teacher education</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Soccer club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Einar</td>
<td>NYT coach</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>&gt; 20</td>
<td>National coach education</td>
<td>Teacher education</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>NYT coach</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>&gt; 12</td>
<td>UEFA Pro</td>
<td>After-school care education</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>NYT coach</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>&gt; 28</td>
<td>UEFA Pro</td>
<td>Teacher education</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>NYT coach</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>&gt; 8</td>
<td>UEFA Pro</td>
<td>Bachelor (Sport)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NTD, National talent development; NYT, National youth team.
decided the order of the questions and the course of the interview. For that reason, the interviews differed in length (71–104 minutes) and in the degree of saturation with regard to each question. The interviews were in Danish, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were subsequently sent to the participants for verification. To preserve anonymity, the coaches had the opportunity to delete or modify sequences in the transcribed data, and they were given pseudonyms in the presentation of the results. All participants approved the transcriptions.

**Data analysis**

The analysis of data proceeded in two phases employing two qualitative methodical procedures: phase 1 meaning condensation and phase 2 theoretical interpretation of the interview text. First, I conducted analyses focusing on meaning and narrative by the aid of what Kvale and Brinkmann called ‘meaning condensation’ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.205). The meaning condensation entailed a summarizing of longer sequences of interview text into shorter, rephrased texts explicating main themes. These themes were given names such as ‘learning from role models’, ‘transitions in coaching career’, ‘important relations in coaching career’ and ‘types of learning situations and episodes’. The meaning condensation provided an inductive reading of the data and a very early understanding of each coach’s pathway to expertise. I used meaning condensation only as a preliminary way of sorting out themes in each interview which provided me with a shorter and rewritten version of the interview that helped me maintain a whole picture of each coach when I turned to phase 2 the theoretical interpretation of the interview text, which was conducted as cross-case analysis contrary to the meaning condensation of single cases. In the ‘theoretically informed reading’ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 235) of the interview text I applied (1) Werthner and Trudel’s constructivist perspective on learning situations as the structuring theory and (2) the concept of biographicity and biographical learning as a critical reflecting of these situations. The theoretical interpretation of the data provided a deductive analysis of the interview text and explored the coaches’ narratives using the basic assumption in the study, namely that the way an elite sport coach makes sense of mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations he/she encounters can be studied by taking a biographical look at these situations. For the theoretical data analysis, I coded the interview text into three categories: mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations, and in this way I tried out the use of Werthner and Trudel’s categories for understanding the eight soccer coaches’ learning. In closing, I used the concept of biographicity and biographical learning as the theoretical framework of a critical reading of the categories, in particular the category internal learning situations. My analytical approach consisted of, by turns, theoretical reflections and open-minded reading of the transcripts in a search for meaning rather than of the ‘pure’ inductive creation of a theory as occurs in grounded theory (Glaser &
Findings and discussion

The findings are divided into three sections corresponding to the categories of mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations, respectively. The attempt to maintain this systematic structure in the findings reflects the theoretical interpretation of the interview data, and an interest in trying out the consistency of the three learning situations compared both to the interview data and to the concept of biographical learning.

At first glance, the three learning situations seemed applicable as descriptors of the coaches’ learning situations. A preliminary interpretation of data pointed at unmediated learning situations being slightly favoured over mediated learning situations as pivotal in coaches’ learning paths. However, in-depth analysis provided new insight into important differences between the ease of finding examples for the ways in which mediated and unmediated learning situations works, whereas internal learning situations seemed to be of a different and far more complex nature.

The following three sections present findings and discussions of the three learning situations and pave the way for my conclusions.

Mediated learning situations: courses and study tours

All the coaches have experienced formal coach education: five coaches completed the UEFA (the Union of European Football Associations) coach education programme and three coaches completed the highest national coaching programme. In addition, five coaches had a teacher training qualification \(n = 5\), two had a BA in sport and one had a course in engineering. The coaches’ accounts of their participation in these mediated learning situations are somewhat contradictory and unforthcoming. Generally, they considered formal coaching courses programmes important because they provided opportunities to meet other coaches and exchange ideas and thoughts, and yet they speak about the formal coach education in sceptical terms:

Of course I have been to some coach courses and thought: "Wow, this was really good". But mostly I think that I learn something when I am together with people in many different settings. (George)

One thing is that you take care of your own development, I mean, you join the ‘soccer-talk’, improve your coaching, take compulsory courses and so on. That’s only 50% of it. The rest is networking. (Brian)

As was the case in previous studies (Nash & Sproule, 2009; Bennie & O’Connor, 2010), the coaches here perceived formal coaching courses (Mallett et al., 2009) as underestimating how differently coaches develop and expand their knowledge.
explained his view on the impact of coach education courses on his development of expertise:

I’m not a product of the Danish soccer coach education. I enjoyed attending the courses, but my own investigative style, challenges and further training really made me the coach I am today. To give us all that might be too much to ask of the coach education. (Harry)

Harry’s experience was consistent with the other coaches in this study and with the findings of Trudel and Gilbert (2006) and Nash and Sproule (2009), who asserted that the vast majority of high performance coaches consider coach education courses of minor importance to their development.

On the other hand, all eight coaches spoke warmly about organized study tours and excursions with peer coaches. Most often these study tours and excursions were planned by the DBU and are in this way to be considered as mediated learning situations because the programme is decided on and organized ‘by a person other than the learner’ (Werthner & Trudel, 2009, p. 437). Additionally, the study tours took on a ‘scholastic’ character. Bourdieu (1998) discussed how the scholastic rationale reflects an appreciation for and an interest in the naming of things. Such pursuits require the possession of free time, of skhole (Christensen, 2009, p. 374), or time to play seriously with speculative problems such as terminology and criteria for good coaching practice at a distance from the urgency of one’s own practical situation. Two of the coaches related their learning from participating in study tours:

You look outside national borders all the time, and look for how to do things better. And this is why we every year have study tours to interesting places, where we look for better ways of doing things and I think these tours are exceptionally rewarding. (Axel)

Every year the other coaches and I travel abroad to watch the best players in Europe and other places in the world to include these players in our experience, mostly because we want to mirror these players’ talent in that of our own players, but we also want to see how other coaches go about the identification and training of the best players. (Einar)

Study tours and excursions are integral parts of elite soccer coach education in Denmark, and apparently they are highly valued, because they are more structured than casual unmediated meetings and less formal than traditional classroom teaching. According to the coaches, the tours are legitimized as mediated learning situations by having educational objectives. Similarly, visits to top-ranking international soccer clubs are described by the coaches as ‘eye-openers’ and ‘encouraging’, because they see other expert coaches in real situations. They see how other expert coaches perform their job, and they recognize a broader repertoire of movement patterns and ways to ‘do’ elite soccer coaching.

This type of mediated learning situation seemed to be fruitful to the development of coaching expertise, because the coaches have the opportunity to reflect and discuss their own practice and their own soccer culture through casual observations of and encounters with international contexts. In these situations the coaches
possessed *skholè* during the study tours but without the fixed structures of institutionalized and academic settings and, most importantly, without a feeling of being forced to sit at a school desk again. Borrowing Bourdieu’s (1998) terminology, the study tours might be said to underpin the social space and the cultural capital of soccer as a relatively non-scholastic field (Christensen, 2009), and might thus add to the coaches *doxical* knowledge. Opposite to the other coaches in the study, who had a teacher education or similar educations, Harry and Brian had a BA in sport and they gave me the impression that because they were ‘scholastic’ minded they differed from Danish soccer coaches in general. Nevertheless they referred to non-scholastic learning situations when I asked them where they learned important skills or had important experiences:

I took much important inspiration from our study tours and from my journeys to countries that are good at talent development. I saw with my own eyes what they did. I do not have a pedagogical education, and frankly speaking I am not an educated man. I did manage to get my BA in sport, but I didn’t realize all the tools and knowledge they tried to teach me until much later when I needed the tools in connection with the study tours, my talks with coaches in other countries etc. (Harry).

Travelling to selected elite sports environments, checking out players and observing training sessions and training facilities in the company of peer coaches during the study tour seemed to provide an *authentic* alternative to traditional coaching courses, because this orchestration of a mediated learning situation encouraged the ‘in-taking’ of socio-cultural and environmental influences (e.g. an active and reactive learning process in the coach) rather than ‘in-putting’ (e.g. an act of teaching performed by the educator). In other words, the study tours seemed to support the biographical learning of the coaches because these mediated learning situations challenged self-willed, autopoietic accomplishment (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17) on the part of active coaches.

**Unmediated learning situations: role models and networks**

Seven of the eight coaches spoke of the importance of older and more experienced coaches as role models and of their influence on the coaches’ view of themselves. The role models have functioned like an echo of their practice or as a midwife for developing their expertise. Through their personal approach to the task of coaching, the role models represented different styles and paths through the world of soccer, with which the coaches could identify and thereby settle their preferences. David provided this narrative about how two role models inspired him by being different from his own expectations:

It was like a landmark in my career to meet Per (a coach 20 years older and a schoolteacher like David) when I stated at the sports high school as a 19-year-old kid. We’ve developed a close friendship over the past 20 years, and today we can have fun together and I can say to him that I was not that fascinated by him anyway (but of cause I was). He represented another culture – an elite culture. I
came from a smaller club with ideals such as equality and volunteerism, and he
was an elitist character, but not in too extreme a way. He represented something
about elite soccer I didn’t know before I met him. In the same way I have met a
small number of people as I have progressed through coaching, who have really
made an impact on me as a coach and as a person. But I think that development
as a coach takes place in leaps and bounds with long pauses in between. When I
was 25–26 years old I started the UEFA A coach training, and here I met Ole,
who also had a very positive influence on me – both in terms of soccer and in
terms of mindset. Ole was an inspiration because he always questioned my way of
doing things: ‘Why are you doing this? And what’s your reason for doing that?’
And often I think that, when you are a young and ambitious coach, you see or
hear things, and you try to apply these things, but you’re less aware of the reasons
why you do it, and even less aware of the consequences. Ole taught me to be
aware [. . .]. Nevertheless, I think that a coach has his very own ”self” with him all
along the way – I mean, you gather together the best influences from these very
few people in creating your own way of being a coach. It was important for me
especially in the initial stages of my elite coach development to have this reflective
response to everything I did in order to develop and not just to be taught that this
is right and this is wrong. (David)

David’s narrative reflected a common appreciation among coaches of the personal
feedback from experienced expert coaches—especially when these coaches were able
to communicate their reflections on their own ‘style’ and allow the younger coach to
be formally or informally apprenticed to him or her. When asked about what they
learned, who they learned from and where they learned, the coaches spontaneously
referred to one or more specific role models that functioned as supervisors or
mentors (Nash & Sproule, 2009), who gave of their time, their awareness and their
experiences to the coach. Often—as in the case of David—the role models were
associated with certain phases in the coach’s development. The communicative
framework of these apprenticeship relations, the mutual interest in the inner logic of
both the ‘master’ and the ‘newcomer’ and the self-reflexive temporal structure of the
experiences caused by these unmediated learning situations may well be the evidence
of biographicity and biographical learning pervading the coaches’ development of
expertise.

With the changing conditions in adult learning—the erosion of traditional
lifeworlds, the breakdown of classical milieus and the disappearing of ‘normal’ life
course scripts (Alheit, 1995; Alheit & Dausien, 1999)—role models and regular
meetings with experienced coaches apparently have more to offer to an understand-
ing of the practices and pathways that coaches find themselves in more than
certified coaching courses. In these idiosyncratic learning paths, the coaches mirror
their own practice in the practice of significant others. Through personal encounters
with other coaches’ individual ways of doing things, they are involved in a dynamic
process in which each tries to make sense of and assign an inner logic to his own
experiences to create a personal style instead of simply copying another coach’s
practice. It seems understandable, then, that the coaches in this study expressed
considerable respect for individual ways of thinking and acting. This even applies to
not having role models within the sport. Brian was a graduate student in sport
sciences while he held the position as NTD coach, and he spoke of his ‘academic’
style, which did not include a role model among experienced coaches but a good
network of like-minded coaches:

> I can’t name any specific role models. I really believe in myself, and in the theories
> that I learned at the university. But I would say that David (another NYT-coach) is
> very much like me, and perhaps a few steps ahead of me. He is not a role model, but
> we’ve been really good inspiration to each other. (Brian)

Most coaches preferred not to refer to any textbook when discussing their own expert
knowledge. Instead, the coaches expressed a deep respect for individual (and even
tacit) preferences in coaching knowledge. Networking with like-minded coaches was
highly valued learning situations, because they developed the coach’s ‘sense of
coaching expertise’, a feeling of belonging to a community of practice (Wenger,
1998, p. 173) of expert coaches and a feeling of forming ‘an insider trajectory’

An alternative version of the workings of role models was reported by Curt. He
spoke about the stimulating environment in the club and in the team of coaches:

> I am inspired by all the leaders I have worked with over the years. I think I've been
> inspired in my current club, because there are so many coaches, and you’re offered
> challenges all the time. We have a fantastic milieu in which we can confront each
> other. (Curt)

In this way, Curt’s workplace functioned as a sort of ‘environmental role model’ and
a network of unmediated learning situations. The sense of expertise is not, then, a
fixed condition but develops and changes against the backdrop of the biographies,
narratives, styles, relationships and discourses at hand in unmediated learning
situations such as networks and communities of practice.

**Internal learning situations: personal styles and ‘breathing spaces’**

One way of talking about internal learning situations is to describe personal style in
the coaches’ way of thinking about their job. The coaches in this study said that they
believed it is acknowledged—and also ‘natural’ for a coach—to have a unique
personal style and a so-called philosophy (Bennie & O’Connor, 2010), that guides
the coaches’ assessments and actions. George said:

> When you discuss all of this, you have to look at what type of person you are. Where
> are you in all of this, what about your own philosophy? (George).

Frank exemplified how Danish coaches use their personal philosophy by describing
his view of the difference in talent identification in Denmark compared to Holland
and Spain:

> In Danish soccer we have very different views of soccer, whereas in Holland and
> Spain they have a single model. We just can’t do that in Denmark, because we are
> far too... umm... we do our own thing. That’s why we will always select our own
> type [of player]. Sometimes I also think, ‘How can that player even be considered?
It’s completely hopeless.’ But that’s because it [talent identification] reflects our philosophy. (Frank)

The word philosophy in this quotation indicates a personal compass reading that points at certain qualities and core values rather than others, but this does not automatically mean that the personal compass reading is reflecting an inner standard detached from the outer world. In fact, the quotation points out an important distinction in Frank’s philosophy: the socio-cultural differentiation between Danish and foreign soccer coaches’ ways of speaking about and practicing their philosophy. The quotation suggests a socio-cultural shaping of the coaches’ philosophies and styles that goes beyond the inner standard of the individual coach. A more traditional psychological way of understanding what a philosophy may mean to coaches is described in Bennie and O’Conner’s (2010) study of Australian coaches’ philosophies. The authors indicated that:

 [...] professional coaches possess their own unique philosophy of coaching with each coach describing their main values, attitudes and objectives for why they coach as they do. (Bennie & O’Connor, 2010, p. 319)

However, similar to the vast majority of sports psychological studies in this field of research, Bennie and O’Connor describe coach philosophy as an internal and individual characteristic in the coach. These types of studies do not explain how coaches acquire their own philosophies of coaching. Building on the interviews in this study and recent investigations (e.g. Jones, 2007; Christensen, 2009; Potrac & Jones, 2009a, 2009b), I found that the development of a coach’s personal style and philosophy primarily involved a wide range of socio-cultural and environmental influences. The coaches’ stories were not about ‘lone outriders’ isolated from the external world, even if they did speak about the importance of individuality and personal styles and philosophies. Coaches may perceive their personal style and philosophy as the existence of an inner logic, an intrapersonal knowledge (Côté & Gilbert, 2009), of core values or explicit goals. Nevertheless, the point to be made here is that a so-called personal philosophy is constructed around social interactions and relates to a coach’s incorporation of preferences or classificatory schemes (Bourdieu, 1990; Christensen, 2009) that develop through the coaches’ struggles for principles and preferences as regards how the field of coaching soccer should be perceived and classified. If this is the case, then it can be assumed that mediated as well as unmediated learning situations take in negotiations about socially constructed capital, taste and power (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998) and that these learning situations smooth the path for the coach’s sense of a personal style and philosophy. The development of a personal style and philosophy in the coaches seemed to mirror one of the basic paradoxes of adult learning (Jarvis, 1992), namely that learning is individually experienced by the learner as a biographical (and perhaps internal) matter and yet it is highly influenced and facilitated by a multitude of socio-cultural patterns. Consequently, to cope with the ‘in-taking’ of socio-cultural and environmental influences, there seems to be a need for another way of speaking about internal learning situations. Internal learning situations may function as
non-localisable ‘breathing spaces’ for the coaches, in which they are allowed to reinterpret their impressions and experiences and modify their cognitive structure, in other words their network of knowledge, feelings and emotions (Werthner & Trudel, 2009, p. 446).

Compared to the attempt to describe the content of coaching philosophies, this is another way—a more constructionist way—of talking about internal learning situations. Nevertheless, it was not easy to identify such situations explicitly in the interview data except from vague statements such as ‘always thinking about soccer’, which corresponded to the description of a common learning situation observed by Werthner and Trudel (2009, p. 439). Below is a sample of the coaches’ statements pertaining to the code ‘always thinking about soccer’:

- Learning things goes on all the time, year on year and from day to day [...] I try to be open-minded, even though I’m getting on, and don’t say, ‘I’ve seen that or done that before’. (George)
- There are loads of things churning around inside my head all the time. (Frank)
- If you want to develop as a coach, I think it is important always to be thinking about everything going on every day at the pitch. (David)

From the cross-case analysis of the data material it becomes clear that a coach’s internal learning situations occur in-between the flux of daily activities and are expressed in these statements as an attitude signalling reflection and mindful action. In the aforementioned quotations the coaches implicitly indicate that their coaching worlds are made real through social processes and interactions ‘year on year and from day to day’ (George), not in specific moments, but ‘all the time’ (Frank) and ‘every day at the pitch’ (David) while doing their job. None of the coaches were explicit about actual situations or tangible episodes in which they experienced internal learning. Hence, it seemed that internal learning takes the form of biographicity, that is to say a highly informal, autopoietic, self-creating resource for coping with reality. The term ‘breathing spaces’ may illustrate the way in which biographicity oxidizes the coach’s sense of coaching expertise. This autopoietic resource pervades the coaches’ thoughts and actions more or less intentionally to allow them to understand and reinterpret what they derive in any given learning situation, whether it be mediated or unmediated. As Werthner and Trudel (2009) make clear, ‘they [the coaches] were active learners’ (p. 446), meaning that they apparently engaged in continuous learning, which echoes Schön’s perception of two fundamentally different abilities in a practitioner, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). There are similarities between the category of internal learning situation and what Schön called reflection-on-action in that both represent the ability to analyse and explore one’s own experiences from previous actions. In sum, internal learning situations as described here are complex and process-related in nature and can be said to contribute to developing personal style. Internal learning situations are hard to identify and extremely difficult to frame as actual situations. Instead, I have
suggested the term ‘breathing spaces’ as a metaphor for the way in which the coach’s biographicity pervades and oxidizes his/her expertise and personal style.

**Concluding thoughts**

On the basis of eight qualitative research interviews with Danish NYT soccer coaches and using the concept of biographical learning, this article aimed to explore the learning paths of elite sport coaches in their development of a sense of expertise. By way of conclusion, this study suggests three insights.

First, the study enables us to have another look at Werthner and Trudel’s categories of mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations. The categories were fruitful as guiding structures in the preliminary analysis and categorization of traditional learning situations such as coach education courses taking place in classrooms. Nevertheless, distinctions between the three learning situations seem blurred when used in practice because the very word ‘learning situation’ may express both actual episodes, such as coach-to-coach dialogues during a 2-day study tour situated in a longer learning process, and abstract conditions, such as overall structures deriving from the coach’s biographicity and pervading adult learning, regardless of mediated or unmediated learning situations. This study shows that more nuanced descriptions and analyses of coaches’ learning situations combining mediated, unmediated and internal learning situations (e.g. study tours) may be fruitful for future studies of coaches’ learning paths.

Second, a number of important interactions seem to portray coaches’ learning paths: (1) joint study tours that allow time to play seriously with issues (skholè), such as developing criteria for good coaching practice, at a distance from the urgency of a specific situation, (2) meeting coaches and other experts in face-to-face dialogues, in which their coaching philosophy can be discussed, negotiated and developed and (3) finding role models and networks to function as mentors or supervisors who allotted their time, awareness and experiences to the coach. These findings correspond with those of Nash and Sproule (2009) and of Bennie and O’Connor (2010), in that pivotal sources in coaches’ learning were to be found in the personal qualities or styles of other coaches, in networking and in the development of a coaching philosophy. Likewise, Chase concluded that ‘coaching education and leadership training programmes should consider focusing on helping coaches and leaders develop a growth mindset about their leadership abilities’ (Chase, 2010, p. 296). Whereas previous studies have pointed at the limited impact of mediated learning situations and formal learning, the evidence of this study was that mediated learning situations such as study tours and excursions were beneficial to the coach’s development of a sense of expertise. This form of mediated learning situation seemed to be capable of mixing methods from structured informal coach education and from the situated learning approach found in formal education as recommended by Mallett et al. (2009). Future development of coach educations may benefit from these insights in prioritizing a mixed methods approach that includes these important interactions.
Third, internal learning situations were hard to identify and extremely difficult to frame as actual situations. Instead, I suggested the term ‘breathing spaces’ to designate the coaches’ biographicity as it pervades and oxidizes their expertise and personal style whenever they reconsider and reinterpret their experiences to modify their cognitive structure to cope with the ‘in-take’ (Alheit & Dausien, 1999) of socio-cultural and environmental influences. Most important, the coaches placed high value on a personal style as a main guide in the many-sided assessments and actions in their job. Indeed, with inspiration from the concept of biographical learning I will advocate that the eight soccer coaches’ development of a personal style is both a ‘constructionist achievement of the individual’ (Alheit, 2009, p. 126), that is, the coach’s re-shaping of a preferred style through his/her daily involvement and interactions in socio-cultural processes in which the style becomes a self-referential guide and a social process, that is, a process which makes the coach capable of ‘actively shaping and changing his/her social world’ (Alheit, 2009, p. 126). This suggestion may add further clarification to Werthner and Trudel’s concept of internal learning situations, because the so-called ‘situation’ turns out to be a process or to be exact: a biographical learning process and not an actual situation.

Against the background of this study it may be suggested that future coach educations might incorporate an approach that favours the coaches’ biographical learning and development of expertise as personal journeys in authentic learning situations, an encouragement to create breathing spaces in the coach’s professional life and assistance in learning from them. It is likely that a biographically oriented educational strategy of this kind would optimize the coaches’ learning processes in a mixture of learning situations.

References


