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‘We were all looking at them quite critically’: Collaborative reflection on a university-based coach education program

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‘We were all looking at them quite critically’: Collaborative reflection on a university-based coach education program

Despite the potential to enhance learning in higher education, collaborative reflection in practical settings has received limited attention. This study investigated collaborative reflection within peer coaching assessments on a university-based coach education program. Data were collected through focus groups with undergraduate sports coaching students and individual interviews with module instructors. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes and six sub-themes as follows: reflective processes (evaluating peers’ experiences, collaboration through shared knowledge); social support (practical support, emotional support); and engagement (task engagement, pressure of assessment). Evaluating peer coaching performance through observation, participation, and discussion enhanced students’ awareness of their own coaching practice. Findings highlight a tendency for students to exchange knowledge informally and several barriers to collective reflection within formal practical settings. Students provided social support to help peers manage the demands of practical coaching assessments. Instructors’ perspectives supported and challenged the student data, culminating in recommendations to enhance collaborative reflection within and beyond a module of study.

Keywords: Sports coaching, strengths-based reflective practices, social support, thematic analysis

Introduction

Being a reflective coach is considered a distinguishing feature of coaching effectiveness and expertise (Cushion, 2018), and university-based coach education programs have the potential to develop critically reflective coaches (Turner & Nelson, 2009). Students on higher education coaching programs have demonstrated improved reflective skills and new levels of awareness as part of a transformational learning experience (Potter, 2017). Indeed, enhancing reflective skills on these programs can help students connect information with professional practice and develop the skills to create meaningful learning experiences throughout their coaching career (Kuklick et al., 2015). However, a recent review of university-based programs revealed challenges when engaging student-coaches in reflective learning activities (Trudel et al., 2020). Furthermore, despite the recent proliferation of university-based coach education programs, few studies have investigated student learning and engagement (Roberts & Ryrle, 2014). The current study examines reflective learning amongst students on a university-based coach education program, with a focus on collaborative reflection.

Sports coaches require both interpersonal knowledge that informs their myriad relationships, as well as comprehensive understandings of themselves, with this introspection enhancing coach learning and performance (Rynne et al, 2017). However, whilst reflection enables coaches to examine their behaviour and beliefs, and subsequently transform themselves into their idea of a 'good coach,' some have trouble reflecting on and communicating their development (Jacobs et al., 2014). Enhancing student-coaches' reflective skills through different teaching approaches warrants investigation because it differentiates university-based coach education programs and those offered by sport federations, which primarily concentrate on coaching principles and sport-specific knowledge (Trudel et al., 2020). Recent research promotes learner-centered coach education, in which collaboration and knowledge creation are central

facets, with the instructor acting as a facilitator of learning (Milistetd et al., 2019). Collaborative reflection has been defined as a process of collective experiential learning through observation, cooperation, and knowledge exchange (Dixon, 2021). Collaborative reflection can occur either individually as the learner links their knowledge to the experience of others, or collectively as the experiences of each member are combined and reflected upon (Prilla et al., 2012). Research suggests collaborative reflection can enhance confidence, establish a sense of collegiality (Peel & Shorthand, 2004), and improve communication between peers to support a holistic learning experience (McKenna et al., 2009). However, there is limited research examining the processes of collaborative reflection in sports coaching and practical contexts in higher education.

Regular peer group activities can promote deeper learning approaches and increase students' reflective capacity (Bold, 2008). Indeed, collaborative reflection in small groups can develop future practice, increase learning gained from experience, and improve professional socialisation (Morris & Stew, 2007). In one study, kinesiology students perceived group work as beneficial to their learning because peers can explain material in understandable ways, whilst helping to clarify new information (Lumpkin et al., 2015). However, another study revealed that despite being placed in discussion groups, undergraduate sports coaching students appeared to defer to the one who 'knew more', who essentially 'becomes the lecturer' (De Martin Silva et al., 2015). Collaborative reflection also presents difficulties such as personality clashes and ensuring conversation topics are relevant to each member (Glazer et al. 2004). Moreover, implementing learner-centered approaches could be met with resistance in traditionally instructor-focused environments which are dominated by the teacher's authority as an expert in their field, with expectations to provide students with knowledge (Milistetd et al., 2019). Although research

highlights the usefulness of group work on undergraduate programs, further research is warranted to examine how collaborative reflection can be facilitated in these settings.

In addition to developing reflective skills, collaboration with peers could play an important role in building students' resources to help them thrive in demanding situations. Indeed, collaborative reflection can provide positive social support in addition to solving issues and inspiring creativity (Sellheim & Weddle, 2015). Moreover, developing a social network helps coaches affirm and challenge their coaching practices (Rynne et al., 2017), and cooperation driven learning reduces anxiety and creates more positive attitudes, increasing an individual's ability to interpret critical learning moments (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Social support is an important resource to help coaches appraise stress as a challenge and perform effectively under pressure (Dixon & Turner, 2018). Given that sports coaching has been recognised as a stressful activity at a range of levels (Potts et al., 2019), promoting social support amongst coaches is especially pertinent, with recent research by Norris et al. (2020) advocating relationship building within coach education programs.

Extant research suggests collaborative reflection could be an important aspect of developing a strengths-based approach to reflective practices. For example, effective feedback from others can help an individual to reframe a learning situation in a way that creates a feeling of positivity (Ghaye, 2011), whilst engaging in reflective practices with peers can enhance coaches' confidence (Cassidy et al., 2006). According to Fredrickson's (2001, 2004) broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions enhance an individual's personal and social resources, which function as reserves to improve the prospect of thriving under pressure. The broadened mindset that arises from strengths-based conversations can be contrasted with the narrowed mindset triggered by deficit-based reflections and subsequent negative emotions (Ghaye et al., 2009).

However, adopting a strengths-based approach can be challenging if sports coaches believe their greatest area for improvement lies in correcting faults (Dixon, 2021). Indeed, one study revealed a tendency for coaches to reflect on negative aspects of their performance with limited focus on positive features (Carson, 2008). To compound this issue, sport organisations often use deficiency-based approaches in their attempts to develop coaches (Trudel et al., 2016). Therefore, adopting strengths-based reflective practices requires a change in mindset through conversations about what we want to develop (i.e., success, joy) not just eliminate (i.e., problems, stress) (Dixon et al., 2016). Thus, the use of collaborative reflection to enhance social support and coach learning as part of a strengths-based approach is an important idea to explore.

Methodology

The current study's examination of collaborative reflection is exploratory yet draws upon established reflective practice concepts. A qualitative approach captured shared experiences through focus groups combined with individual interviews to contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and is based on the meanings of participants' experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Consistent with this approach, reflexive thematic analysis was used to explain participants' lived experiences, examining the factors that influence and contextualise specific processes (Braun et al., 2019).

Sample and context

The sample consisted of 17 sports coaching students (14 males, 3 females, *mean age*=24.24, *SD*=3.01) enrolled on the first year of a sport and exercise undergraduate degree at a UK university. The university instructors were three males (*mean age*=38, *SD*=11) with an average of 8.33 (*SD*=4.73) years teaching experience in higher education. A purposeful sampling

technique was utilised as the participants were able to purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem (Cresswell, 2007). Inclusion criteria for the student sample consisted of successful completion of a module entitled 'Coaching and Teaching in Sport'. The aims of the module were to: (1) provide students with an introduction to the coaching and teaching process; (2) provide students with the opportunity to develop their practical knowledge and skills in coaching and teaching; (3) introduce students to the principles of effective planning, organising and, conducting coaching sessions; and (4) inform students of risk management.

The delivery pattern of the module consisted of one weekly lecture on sports coaching concepts (e.g., effective communication, pedagogical techniques) followed by a practical coaching session in groups of 15-20 students. In the first four practical sessions of the 12-week module students observed or participated in one-hour 'sample sessions' delivered by university instructors to demonstrate the learning outcomes in a practical context. Students then led coaching sessions within small groups to prepare for an upcoming assessment. Following the instructor and student-led coaching practices, instructors facilitated small group discussions as students collectively analysed the sessions and attempted to relate to the concepts presented in the weekly lectures. For example, instructors asked students to discuss the effectiveness of a coach's communication, session management, and progression of activities.

In weeks 5-12, students were individually assessed on their practical coaching of a sports skill of their choice. As is common practice within coach education programs, students acted as participants or observers for their peers' coaching sessions. Each student coached a maximum of 16 peers for 10 minutes. Peers then broke off into smaller groups to discuss the coach's strengths and areas for improvement. These comments were subsequently shared amongst the whole group, facilitated by the instructor. Drawing upon the feedback received, students were required

to complete a written assignment titled ‘self-reflective essay’ to evaluate their coaching performance. Being observed and evaluated by coach educators can be a stressful experience for coaches (Dixon et al., 2017), therefore the assessment setting was of interest due to the focus on students’ social support.

Data collection

Having obtained institutional ethical approval, four focus groups consisting of three to five participants were conducted. Consistent with the purpose of the current study, focus groups have been conceptualised as a form of collaborative reflection-on-action that enable participants to engage in exploratory discussion of key issues and create solutions to mutual problems (Li, 2017). Focus groups have been utilised to develop an understanding of learning experiences amongst university students (Sutton et al., 2007) and to investigate sports coaches’ reflective practices (Hughes et al., 2009). This method was used in the current study to encourage interaction and generate a depth of discussion and ideas between members (Jones, 2015). Moreover, inhibitions are often relaxed in focus groups, and the more natural environment prompts increased openness whilst allowing flexibility to explore unanticipated issues (Krueger, 1994). This was important given the sample of undergraduate student-coaches and the focus on collaborative reflection.

Following the focus groups, individual interviews with module instructors were conducted to gain additional and alternative perspectives. Interviewing university instructors can help gain insights into what they have learned and how they structured their learning activities to improve student engagement and learning (Williams, 2014). Information on the instructors’ role in facilitating collaborative reflection was of particular interest to help inform practical recommendations. Although interviews can be problematic considering power relations between

participant and researcher, interviewing can capture people's voices and put these in dialogue with other opinions observed in different interviews (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). As the instructors were already known by the interviewer, we acknowledged that nuances of such relationships can influence the conversation. However, the existing rapport helped to generate a depth of discussion which may otherwise have been difficult to obtain.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted by the first author using a semi-structured design which provided a general framework of questions whilst enabling the flexibility to explore responses and gain detailed descriptions of thoughts and experiences (Hall & Getchell, 2014). Focus groups were devised by drawing on relevant literature with open-ended questions that addressed the research topic in terms of experience, behaviour, and context (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Students were informed that their own experiences were of interest to negate perceptions of desired responses. The individual interviews were based on analyses of focus group data in addition to key concepts from literature.

Data analysis

Data were transcribed and analysed thematically using Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step process outlined below. By adopting a reflexive process of moving forwards and backwards through the data, the analysis was produced through the integration of theoretical assumptions, disciplinary knowledge, and the content of the data (Braun et al., 2016). As such, thematic analysis gave us a flexible framework to explore transcripts for surprising data, whilst the generation of themes was informed by extant research: (1) Familiarisation with the data; we read the transcripts, making notes on relevant extracts. (2) Generation of initial codes; having labelled all relevant extracts, these were checked against the original data and subsequently redefined. (3) Searching for themes and (4) Reviewing themes; codes were categorised into themes. This was complex as

some codes overlapped several themes and some did not fit neatly. The initial analyses contained a greater number of disparate categories which were subsequently collapsed into broader themes to establish a coherent hierarchy. (5) Defining and naming themes; the content of each main theme and sub-theme was encapsulated with a concise phrase to provide structure. (6) Producing the report; data extracts were selected to illustrate the analysis and interpretation of themes. We strived to offer an account which was succinct yet sufficiently rich in context and detail so the reader can form their own conclusions from the data.

Research quality

Trustworthiness and rigour were established through data and researcher triangulation. Data triangulation was implemented by cross referencing the instructors' responses with themes arising from the focus groups. This form of triangulation strengthens each data collection method and enables a greater understanding of the study (Godínez Martínez, 2018). We examined the instructors' perspectives to offer a more comprehensive view of collaborative reflection, but we were conscious of the potential for the instructor's voices to eclipse those of the students. This required careful consideration of the interaction and presentation of the two data sources.

Researcher triangulation consisted of the second author acting as 'critical friend' to encourage reflection upon different explanations and interpretations of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The second author challenged the preliminary analyses by reframing data extracts through different understandings of theory and alternative perspectives on participants' responses to help (re)define initial codes and organise these into cogent themes.

Results and discussion

Analysis of the focus groups elicited three main themes of reflective processes, social support, and engagement (see table 1). This section presents the main themes and sub-themes illustrated with data extracts from student focus groups and instructor interviews.

Reflective processes

Evaluating peers' experiences

Students described how they evaluated their peers' coaching behaviours and skills when participating or observing the session, which led to an enhanced awareness of their own practice. Students tended to focus on 'what not to do' by identifying the deficiencies of their peers' coaching practice, a process that involved reflecting on feedback provided to peers by an instructor. Students' critique of their peers' coaching was often contextualised to their own learning although this was mainly applied to their assessed practical session, rather than their wider coaching practice

I like listening to what [peers] say. Because you might have a lecturer delivering who has been doing it for years, so it comes natural to them. But when you get different people out of their comfort zones you get to hear what works and what doesn't... It just gives you a bit more perspective of what's good and bad. They make more mistakes as well, being the students, and you probably learn more from the mistakes than perhaps an expert coach doing something right every time. Even seeing someone sort of struggle makes you think constantly that you don't want to be in that position. (Lucas)

We were all looking at them quite critically, like we were all looking at them thinking 'I've got to do my mine next week' and analysing them, thinking from a coaching point of view and seeing what they were doing wrong. Even if we were disengaged, we were still learning from it because we were just thinking 'I won't do it that way when it's my turn'. (Beth)

When you know that the session is being assessed then you kind of assess it yourself.

(Matthew)

Collaboration through shared knowledge

Students revealed how sharing knowledge and perspectives amongst their peers took place informally outside of scheduled classes. Students shared ideas and sought feedback on the content and organisation of their coaching sessions to prepare for the assessment, whilst collectively reviewing their peers' coaching performances. Additionally, students reflected on their own session with peers.

...it was across the week really, general questions like 'have you got your drill sorted yet?' 'If so, what is it?' Just bouncing ideas back and forth and eventually you found an idea that you wanted to go with and progress from there, as opposed to just on your own in your bedroom thinking of a training plan. (Lucas)

We always walked to the next lecture together straight from the session and discussed what went well and what could be improved. Because it was so fresh in your brain so we would have a talk and say, 'actually that was quite good'. Or we would say 'that was a bit pointless so why did they do that?' (Tessa)

A more formal and structured element of shared knowledge was the discussion of peer feedback at the end of each assessed coaching session. In this context, students explained how peer-to-peer feedback could be contrived because it was 'always positive' due to 'not wanting to offend anybody' and was therefore of limited value.

You won't be able to improve because you don't know what your weaknesses are if your peers are always saying positive things because they don't want to upset their friends... you just won't learn from your mistakes. (Adam)

In relation to Prilla et al. (2012) conceptualisation of collaborative reflection, data highlight how collaborative reflection occurred at an individual level as students related their own knowledge to their peers' experiences, with limited collective reflection through shared experiences. The development of self-awareness highlighted in the focus group data supports previous research in the classroom environment in which students valued collaborative learning because they could apply their peers' understandings to their own knowledge (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Interestingly, students emphasised the benefits of learning from peers' deficiencies rather than emulating the good practice of instructors or other 'experts'. Although the students benefitted from this critique in the context of the module, an emphasis on studying errors could present difficulties for continued growth, as Fredrickson's (2001, 2004) broaden-and-build theory asserts that negativity can invoke a narrow attentional focus whereas positivity helps learners to be more adaptable, creative, and receptive to new ideas. The focus on deficiencies could be expected from the sample of first year undergraduate students completing an academic assignment if they perceive the removal of errors will result in a faultless coaching session. Results suggest that adopting a strengths-based approach to reflective practices might initially be challenging for sports coaches, who feel their role is to identify errors and correct negative performance.

Findings reveal further challenges to collaborative reflection in formal settings as students showed a collective awareness of the contrived nature of peer feedback. Results suggest that providing useful and authentic feedback is a skill the participants have not developed in their first year of academic study. Indeed, students may enter university with passive learning tendencies which result in them struggling to take an active role in their learning process (Milistetd et al., 2019). Moreover, conversations on coaching issues can be challenging if coaches struggle to articulate their development (Jacobs et al., 2014), and forced collaboration in

assigned groups with predetermined topics might invoke resistance (Dixon, 2021). Thus, despite highlighting their peers' errors, students might lack the skill or confidence to provide constructive feedback to address these issues. These findings might be expected as Potter (2017) describes the coordination of myriad cognitive skills in an uncertain coaching environment as a 'complex choreography' and suggests that openness to others' perspectives is a dynamic skill developed at higher levels of coach education and training. Indeed, Morris and Stew (2007) asserted that learners in practical settings may be reluctant to share their experiences and openly reflect on their practice unless a supportive environment is created. Therefore, findings highlight the importance of establishing an environment in which students feel comfortable to share feedback as they learn how to communicate their deficit-based analyses constructively.

Instructors' perspectives

Peer evaluation was encouraged as part of a critical approach as instructors highlighted and compared the qualities of different coaches, prompting discussion of how various coaching methods are appropriate for different contexts. Instructors explained how this peer evaluation helped students to contextualise coaching concepts and reflect on their own practice whilst avoiding notions of a 'blueprint' for coaching as modelled by an expert. Challenges to collaborative reflection included competitiveness within peer groups, students' ego, and a lack the confidence to offer their opinions. Thus, instructors emphasised the importance of informal settings to facilitate a more relaxed environment and encourage openness. Moreover, instructors discussed the effectiveness of peer feedback as an effective learning tool.

I've found [peer feedback] very useful. I find the students are willing to open up and give constructive criticism when needed... What I'm more concerned about is when students get that feedback, what will they actually do with it? How are you taking that information onboard? Are

you utilising it for practice? Do we give students enough opportunity to apply that? Or is it down to themselves to utilise it? I'm still unsure around how that's effective, and how it can be used applicably to their development. There's sometimes where I've had to challenge feedback and use questioning to help students think critically about why they did that, or why he or she did certain things. (Peter)

To navigate the challenges of collaborative reflection, findings suggest instructors could place more emphasis on collaboration within the smaller groups, whilst using 'directed questioning' to promote authentic peer feedback. Whilst knowledge exchange within the class was limited, data suggest that informal learning situations enhance collaborative reflection. Therefore, students on university-based coach education programs might benefit from designated time and shared spaces that facilitate informal collaborative reflection.

Social support

Practical support

Discussions revealed how students shared feedback and advice to help prepare for their practical assessments. During the sessions, students 'pulled together' to ensure their peers' coaching sessions 'ran smoothly'. Students described how they supported peers by committing effort when performing practical tasks whilst being attentive to the coach's instructions. Furthermore, students emphasised the reciprocal nature of this support as their attitude and behaviours differed according to their relationship with the peer coach.

...you know we are all here to help each other. I would expect the lads to help me if I needed something and vice versa. When the sessions ended, we were always talking about it and giving each other pointers where you could improve and obviously it's important we help each other and get the best out of each other. (David)

You did notice that everyone kind of pulled together. Everyone was turning up and people were listening with intent... this process actually made people want to step up and make it easier for the person delivering the session. Because you know full well that it's going to come back around and if you've been a pain during a session then no one will help you out. (Tariq)

Emotional support

Discussions indicated the potentially stressful nature of the assessment as students were observed and evaluated by the instructor and their peers. Students explained how they provided social support to enhance confidence and alleviate nervousness through empathy and encouragement as part of a collegial learning environment.

In the first week I was not confident at all. I had delivered coaching in the past but more around children and people I knew. So [after] being thrown in around people that you didn't know, there was a clear progression between the sessions, like confidence building and even the cohesion between the group because everyone started getting on. (Sam)

Everyone's in the same boat as well aren't they? Because we knew they were going to be nervous you tend to listen a bit more. (Max)

Everyone just wanted each other to get through without panicking and feeling bad. (Tessa)

Social support cultivated from collaborative reflection helped students manage the demands of the coaching assessment. Research suggests social support enhances students' learning through shared reflection, building a strong emotional base to support the processes of social learning (Peel & Shorthand, 2004). Results also support those of Norris et al. (2020) who found that informational support was a frequently recognised resource amongst coaches, whilst emotional support was identified as a calming influence. Similarly, previous research indicates that social support amongst coaches is positively related to useful perceptions of stress (Dixon et al., 2017).

Students revealed an awareness that generating a positive climate through reciprocal support could not only help their peers but subsequently enhance their own ability to perform under pressure. Fredrickson (2004) states that experiencing positive emotions promotes the discovery of new ideas and relationships, which consequently build that individual's personal and social resources, enabling them to thrive in the future. Thus, current findings support the notion that seeking and providing social support to enhance positive emotions amongst peer groups could help to establish strengths-based reflective practices in educational settings.

Instructors' perspectives

Instructors described how they provided social support to students directly whilst also encouraging cohesion amongst peers by setting focused tasks and emphasising shared learning objectives. Additionally, instructors attempted to build students' confidence by facilitating strengths-based reflections through feedback and 'directed questioning'.

Those coaches who are more introverted, their confidence is low because they don't think they're doing anything right. As soon as you tell them the good things they were doing, they're looking at those good aspects, it brings out their thought process quicker, and their confidence starts to build and then you can get a good response from them, in terms of their enthusiasm for their coaching... they've become more confident because they're working together in a group, and everybody's saying the same thing, and they're looking at the same thing. As human beings, we need connection. As soon as you've got that common connection, that's where I start seeing success. (Iain)

The instructors' strategic use of feedback and questioning to promote an awareness of students' individual qualities could encourage strengths-based conversations and subsequent growth. According to Ghaye (2011) effective feedback is that which presents current limitations and

constraints as exciting challenges as part of a strengths-based approach. Conversely, by focusing too much on problems, discourse becomes a series of deficit-phrased questions leading to deficit-based conversations resulting in deficit-based actions (Trudel et al., 2016). The current study offers further context to previous literature advocating strengths-based approaches, inviting educators to consider the phrasing of their communications to coach ‘in’ strengths, rather than coaching ‘out’ weaknesses.

Engagement

Task engagement

Engagement in peer coaching sessions was impacted by students’ role as either observer or participant. Although comments detailed the advantages of observing from the outside, such as the capacity to ‘focus more on the coach’, responses also revealed a lack of connection and motivation. Conversely, students highlighted the benefits of being actively involved as they were able to ‘get more of a feel’ for the session. The complexity of the skills being taught also influenced engagement as difficult skills required participants to focus more on the demands of the practice, whereas simpler tasks enabled more capacity for peer evaluation.

...because you are involved in the session then you can get caught up in the game and get distracted from what the coach is actually saying or doing but if you are stood on the sidelines watching then you’ll be able to see where he stands or how they have laid it out, but you don’t know how the participants feel about the session. (Danny)

I think tasks that I was not in my comfort zone with, like one of our coaches did kickboxing, I think it was more me as an individual trying to grasp the skill instead of thinking about the coaching side. Because they were a good coach so I could have focused on him a bit more. But

for me it was all about grasping certain elements [of the skill] just in case I come across it in the future. (Calum)

Pressure of assessment

Students described how the pressure of being evaluated influenced their reflections. Discussions suggest this pressure was partly mediated by the timing of students' assessment. Students who coached at the beginning of the module had fewer opportunities to reflect on their peers' practice and reported stress due to the uncertainties of the assessment. In contrast, students assessed later in the module were able to reflect on the cumulative feedback provided but felt pressure to deliver a higher quality session.

...going through the process and seeing people make mistakes makes it easier. I could go through and think 'right, do that, don't do that'. It was a lot easier being at the end than it was the start, and obviously at the start you are dead nervous because you've only just met the group and you don't want to make a mistake. (Tom)

...I made sure that I studied them and listened to everything the assessor said, such as strengths and weaknesses, so when it came to my session I could just get it over and done with and make it as good as possible... As you go nearer the end, they do get better, but you become more nervous. (Max)

Although the assessment encouraged a focus on peer evaluation, comments suggest the resultant pressure was counter-productive to student learning, particularly when their own assessment had finished, and students felt they could 'switch off.'

You know once your [session] is done the pressure is off and you can kind of relax. If there was not the assessment side, then you would keep on learning even after your delivery. (David)

Examples of collaborative reflection were related to students improving their coaching for assessment purposes, rather than enhancing their wider coaching practice as part of a transformational learning experience. Previous research suggests that students are often strategic learners more concerned with passing tests than the wider notion of learning as related to coaching (De Martin Silva et al., 2015). Given the challenges to assessment driven reflections, instructors need to be aware of their role in potentially controlling the reflective process (Trudel et al., 2020), and develop strategies to enhance reflective skills beyond a program of study. Indeed, despite the value of reflective conversations, there is the possibility that responses will not be recorded, reflections not followed with action, and long-term changes not implemented (Dixon, 2021). Thus, educators might instigate more systematic approaches that encourage the transformation of collaborative reflections into action.

Instructors' perspectives

Module instructors discussed strategies to enhance participation in collaborative reflection. To engage students observing from the sidelines, instructors set group tasks involving feedback sheets and whiteboard activities which required students to evaluate specific features of coaching practice. These tasks often focused on positive aspects of coaching, encouraging observers to identify and subsequently provide feedback on their peers' coaching strengths, whilst discussing alternative coaching methods. However, there were few examples of how reflection could be promoted amongst students actively participating in the session.

If you do have those students that don't participate, they're set specific roles, and whether that's to informally assess, and I provide them with a rubric, and they critically assess the person delivering. Then, they will be involved in the feedback at the end, they'll probably take a larger role than if we didn't have anybody observing on the sides. I think just the small conversations

that take place, the interaction between coaches and participants, I think you'll also see reflection taking place in practice. You see people problem-solving and trying to understand what someone's saying, and whether something isn't maybe going right, or if something is going right, how to challenge them further. (Jim)

Interviews reinforced the limitations of developing longer-term reflective skills due to the practical sessions being graded. For example, Peter claimed that students 'switch off the minute they've completed their assessment'. Consequently, online platforms were advocated to promote longer-term reflection and collaboration.

I think maybe utilising some form of social networking platform to support that collaborative approach might be useful, because I think all students are on their phones, so let's work with them, if they're on their phone [anyway.] You'd rather use something that they're comfortable with, and they can share content that way, or collaborate that way. (Peter)

Findings support the use of online platforms in conjunction with group practical tasks to promote longer-term collaborative reflection amongst coaching students. The use of technology could offer new perspectives to students by connecting coach educators and coaching peers (Kucklick et al., 2015). For example, Stoszkowski and Collins (2017) found that structured group blogging enhanced collaboration and critical reflection amongst final year sports coaching students. However, given the struggle for students to stay engaged and motivated throughout the assessments, strategies to focus students' attention on coaching processes during peers' sessions appear central to enhancing collaborative reflection.

Before considering the study's contribution to reflective practice literature, several limitations must be addressed. Firstly, although the findings enable naturalistic generalisation regarding different higher education settings, the sample of pre-existing student groups and

instructors from one university limits the study's transferability. Future studies into reflective practice might collect data across different institutions to obtain broader perspectives. Secondly, whilst student and instructor experiences offer important insights into collaborative reflection, the development of reflective skills was not directly assessed. As such, future research could examine the utility of collaborative reflection to enhance broader reflective skills. Thirdly, data were only collected from one first-year sports coaching module, offering a summary of students' experiences within a specific context. Whilst the instructors drew upon their wider experience, future studies might adopt longitudinal or cross-sectional designs to observe the development of collaborative reflection throughout and beyond a program of study.

Conclusion

The current study examined collaborative reflection on a university-based coach education program. Findings contribute to sports coaching and reflective practice literature by describing how students reflect on and with others in practical settings. Evaluating peers' coaching performance promoted students' self-awareness by encouraging them to reflect on their own coaching practice. Elements of collaborative reflection, such as knowledge exchange, analysis of coaching strengths, and the provision of constructive peer feedback, must be developed for students to derive greater benefit from collective learning experiences. Results also elucidate the importance of social support amongst peers to manage assessment demands and cultivate positive emotions. The current study contributes to literature on reflective practice in higher education as findings reveal how social support can be facilitated to enhance students' learning experience as part of a strengths-based approach. Future research is needed to examine the sustained development of collaborative reflection beyond the confines of academic programs.

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Table 1*Student experiences of collaborative reflection*

Codes	Sub-themes	Main themes
Critique of peer performance Reflecting on feedback given to peer Application to own practice	Evaluating peers' experiences	Reflective processes
Informal collaborations Formal (in class) collaborations Providing peer feedback Peer feedback inauthentic	Collaboration through shared knowledge	
Effort Advice Reciprocity	Practical support	Social support
Enhancing confidence Reducing nervousness Collegiality	Emotional support	
Participation versus observation Task difficulty	Task engagement	Engagement
Nervousness Timing of delivery Short-term reflection	Pressure of assessment	