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Academic Paper

What do coaches actually do to learn and develop? A qualitative exploration of the development narratives of experienced coaches

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Abstract

Coach development is an under-researched phenomenon and our understanding of how coaches learn and develop is therefore limited. The current discourse of coach development is largely framed by professional bodies who have a stake, to varying degrees, in the dominant paradigm. That paradigm is informed by linear stage models of learning and development which, we argue, do not fully address the diversity of coaches, their different developmental needs nor the range of paths they follow to become experienced coaches. To access that diversity, we explore coaches' experience of their development journey using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. We found no universal set of development activities with which coaches engage, but considerable commonality. Our study revealed that how coaches resource and support themselves, influences, and grounds their development. Life events impact professional growth and becoming a coach affects personal identity. Rather than the transmission and mastery of a pre-determined set of skills and knowledge, facility and investment in reflexive learning emerges as the key motor of coaching excellence.

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Introduction

This paper explores the learning and development of professional coaches – a largely under-researched phenomenon. Current studies of coach development place a narrow emphasis on a few attributes such as 'self-awareness' (Carden, Jones, & Passmore, 2023), or the coachee-coach relationship and eschew the idea of looking at development holistically. Coach development practices are mostly predicated on a linear stage model of learning and development. The current

paradigm of coach development is controlled by professional bodies such as EMCC, ICF, and AC using frameworks of competencies and criteria that an individual has to achieve to be called a qualified coach. We argue that, although achieving a qualified status influences coach development, such accolades alone do not guarantee that a coach is expert. Indeed, a narrow emphasis on competencies and linear approaches to learning fails to capture the complexity and variety of coaches' developmental paths and therefore limits our understanding of the phenomenon (Rajasinghe, Garvey, Smith, Burt, Barosa-Pereira, Clutterbuck & Csigas, 2022). Our research therefore poses the question: "How do experienced coaches make sense of their development?"

Our interest in coaches' experience, and in how they interpret their experience of learning and development, influenced us to explore the phenomenon qualitatively. We employed IPA as our research methodology, interviewed 32 experienced coaches using semi-structured interviews and analysed them following IPA data analysis guidance. The findings suggests that there is no universal set of activities but there is considerable overlap between what coaches do to learn and develop. Some are unsurprising: formal programmes, short courses and workshops, and supervision, for example. Curiosity, openness, how they engage with reflexive learning and an appetite for learning are common attributes. Others, such as being active in a coaching community and informal conversations are perhaps less expected. The implications of our findings are profound for both coaches planning their own development and for those who provide or guide coach development. They challenge the scope and content of what is usually considered 'developmental' for coaches.

We present below a brief literature review to relate how coaches develop to some dominant theories of adult learning and highlight the theoretical gaps. We then explain our choice of methodology, data collection and analysis procedure, followed by a discussion of our findings. Finally, we discuss the practical and theoretical implications from our study.

Literature Review

Coach Development Research

Coach development in a business context is largely an unexplored phenomenon (Carden *et al.*, 2021). However, it is increasingly a focus for professional bodies and training institutes, due to stakeholder demands for accredited coach training programs and for coaches to be accredited by a professional coaching body. The standards set by these bodies place strong emphasis on coaching competencies (Garvey & Stokes, 2022). Similarly, coach education and training programs still largely emphasise skills, tools, and techniques (Jones, 2020).

Jordon et al. (2017) argue that most coach training programs are based on anecdotal evidence of how coaches learn and develop. The research on coach development and training focuses on elements of development, such as self-awareness (Carden *et al.*, 2021) and the changes that coaches go through as they learn coaching theories and skills (Atad & Grant, 2020). Twelve years ago, Campone and Awal (2012) emphasised the lack of understanding of how diverse life experiences impact coaches' professional development but to-date this phenomenon remains under-researched. Furthermore, the current literature places emphasis on the outcomes of coach training. For example, recent research in this domain claims that coach training improved coaches' solution-focused thinking, goal orientation/attainment, self-insight, learning, self-efficacy, need for reflection, mindfulness and satisfaction, career adaptability, led coaches to consider their identity and enhanced their confidence (Atad & Grant, 2020; Grant, 2008; Jordon *et al*., 2017; Legget and James, 2016). Moreover, some literature (e.g. Passmore & Sinclair, 2020) promotes certain training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that coaches should attend to fulfil the requirements of accreditation bodies. This narrow focus of current research hinders our understanding of what coaches do to learn and develop. In particular, it disregards the social

nature of learning (Garvey, 2011; Rajasinghe & Allen, 2020) and arguably dehumanises the coach by disregarding the personal, cultural, and social context in which they live and work.

To understand how coaches learn and develop more holistically, it is important to investigate their situated and subjective experiences of their developmental journeys. This is a valid method of knowledge development (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Rajasinghe, 2020) designed to address the research void we have highlighted.

Adult learning research

The wider adult learning literature offers some insights into how coaches may learn and develop. Jarvis (1992) argues that how adults learn is a complex phenomenon. We regard how coaches learn and develop as a subjective and person-centred process reflecting their unique life and professional experiences.

Vygotsky (1978) regards social interactions as a developmental mechanism and promotes the concept of 'more knowledgeable other', an individual who is experienced and/or whose knowledge is relatively higher than the learners. He introduced the concept of 'proximal development zone', a territory where learners need support from someone to perform. Garvey (2017) reiterates this, claiming that enhanced learning and development becomes possible if appropriate support and guidance are offered. Moreover, considering that the adults (coaches) are self-directed and informed learners who are resourceful (Knowles, 1975), an andragogy informed approach (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2015) for coach development may be more appropriate.

The coaching literature acknowledges that coaching experience has a significant influence on coach development (Clutterbuck, 2010; Bachkirova et al., 2014). The idea of learning from experience was originally proposed by Dewey in 1938 (Gray, 2006) and developed by Kolb (1984) who challenged the idea of mere acquisition of abstract knowledge and highlighted the significance of both the experience and reflection upon the experience to develop a new understanding. In experiential learning, the concrete experience of learners is considered to be the basis of reflection (Bachkirova *et al.*, 2014), which is, in turn, a key enabler of self-awareness in coach training (Carden *et al.*, 2021).

Reflection develops learners' understanding and helps them to question their preconceptions (Du Toit, 2014; Argyris, 2002). Du Toit (2014) and Mezirow (1991) argue that enhanced understanding of those preconceptions and sense-making improve self-understanding of the leaners (Bolton, 2014). Therefore, "coaches need to be reflective practitioners" (Grant, 2008, p. 56) to deepen personal learning (Argyris, 2002). According to Brockbank and McGill (2012), interpersonal reflections are more learning oriented compared to intrapersonal reflections. This recognises the importance of social interactions to learning and development and acknowledges that learning is a process of social participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Coaching literature endorses this view by acknowledging social engagements such as supervision as developmental for both coaches and coachees (Hawkins & Turner, 2017; Bachkirova, Jackson, Hennig & Moral, 2020).

Consequently, this involvement enhances their capability and understanding resulting in a "move from legitimate peripheral participation into full participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.37). This view of learning to links concepts such as experiential learning, andragogy, reflective and transformational learning and complies with Leggett and James (2016) who claim that coach development is informed by five fundamental processes, i.e. reflective practice, experiential and social learning, developing self-awareness and coach identity. It also provides a more holistic and flexible learning opportunity for coaches to learn and develop which is important because becoming a coach is a journey not a destination (Rajasinghe *et al*., 2022).

Despite the possibilities offered by open and flexible approaches for the development of coaches, current practices seem to be dominated by a positivist philosophy (Bachkirova and Kaufman, 2008), and are therefore, linear, competency based, goal focused, teacher led and largely ineffective (Knowles *at al.*, 2015). This mode of "learning and development is also regarded as highly prominent by the institutions that market standards and certifications" (Rajasinghe & Allen, 2020, p. 3) but rarely questioned as "we are become so used to this approach that we no longer notice it" (Garvey, 2017, p.685). The power of such institutions then drives an approach to coach accreditation based on competency frameworks (See Garvey et al., 2018). In our view, this is a reductionist way of learning that fails to fully appreciate the coach as a human being and to provide the independence or intrinsic motivation which are important attributes of adult learning (Rajasinghe & Garvey, 2023). Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand what they actually do to learn and develop themselves.

Methodology

Our starting point is that human understanding is developed through our social interactions and interpretations of those interactions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Our reality "is not in all ways predetermined and 'out there' but in some significant ways is a construction, or an interpretation" (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008, p.110). Informed by this position we explored the phenomenon from the subjective perspective of experienced coaches. To do this, we employed a developed form of IPA, locating our work with the traditions and maxims of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Rajasinghe, 2020; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022). Our goal was to capture and make sense of the subjective intricacies of how coaches learn and develop. We collected coaches' own accounts of their development, listening to their personal narratives - that is, how they made sense of their own growth as coaches.

Our motivation in adopting this approach was to capture the messy variety of individual experience and through that, create a rich resource for both coaches and those who guide or provide for their development.

Sampling and Data Collection

Perspective representation is more important than population representation in qualitative research and in IPA (Gray, 2014; Rajasinghe, Aluthgama-Baduge & Mulholland, 2021). Hence, we recruited a relatively homogenous sample for our study (Smith *et al.*, 2022). We did not consider an exclusive purposive sampling strategy, for example stratified or quota sampling (Robinson, 2014). Our criterion for sampling was simply that the participants were known by the research team to be experienced coaches. We sought a degree of geographical spread, but we did not seek a representative sample regarding race, gender, age, qualification, and nationality.

We were aware of the importance of small samples for IPA studies as opposed to the general tendency of recruiting large samples for qualitative studies due to positivist influences (Gray, 2014). However, our decision to recruit a relatively large sample, thirty-two experienced coaches, reflected our capacity as a research team of eight to safeguard the idiographic commitment of IPA. Each researcher interviewed 3-5 coaches, employing semi-structured interviews - the most popular data collection method in IPA (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2022). We employed an interview schedule devised by the research team. It set a loose agenda for data collection. Our follow up questions varied from interview to interview and reflected our interest in addressing *"how do experienced coaches make sense of their development?"* The interviews were 45-60 mins long and generated rich, experiential account of coaches' experience of their development.

Data Analysis

The intricacies of involving a group of researchers in a rare, innovative IPA research design with a relatively large number of participants (Smith *et al.*, 2022) was a challenging and equally rewarding scholarly experience. It generated a robust, nuanced, and rich interpretative account of coaches' experience.

Although we deviated from popular IPA research designs, we were guided by IPA's philosophical underpinnings during both the initial phase of data analysis and as we developed further layers of interpretation. Following IPA data analysis guidance (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2021; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), we decided that each researcher would analyse the interviews they conducted. The data analysis process was as follows:

Step 1 – We transcribed the interviews using "Otter" software and then checked the accuracy of the transcription against our recordings. This helped us to develop a semantic record of the interview (Smith *et al.*, 2022) and get closer to participant experiences.

Step 2 – Placing a strong emphasis on idiographic commitments, each researcher analysed the interviews conducted by them following IPA guidelines. For each participant, the analysts developed a theme table and then cross-analysed theme tables of their participants (first cross analysis) to develop a final theme table for the group each researcher analysed. The cross analysis reflected both the shared and unique experiences of our participants (Smith *et al.*, 2022); both were equally important if we were to capture the essence of coaches' experience of development.

Step 3 – One researcher conducted a cross analysis of the tables of themes that resulted from step 2 of the analysis process. This resulted in ten over-arching themes. This additional layer of cross-analysis is a novel approach in IPA data analysis. This step extends the notion of double hermeneutics, and we therefore regarded our process as involving "triple hermeneutics".

Step 4 – We continued our reflective group discussions and selected four themes which seemed most powerful in coaches' accounts of their development. Then, we made two researchers responsible for each theme who returned to the original transcripts to deepen the analysis of the selected themes. The pairs executed key word searches, read, re-read, and listened to the recordings where necessary and extracted quotes related to the themes. Such engagement with the data continued to emphasise the iterative and inductive nature of IPA data analysis.

Step 5 – The pairs involved in step 4, developed a detailed write up with participants' quotes and a summary of their theme. Our interpretation of the themes developed further as we revisited the previous analysis and the original data during the write up. We therefore endorse the view that the analysis is not complete until the write up (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Findings

Our exploration of experienced coaches' narratives of development has revealed a mutually reinforcing set of conditions and activities that facilitated their growth. We present them under four categories:

The drivers for self-development: why coaches look to develop their professional expertise, even when they have become highly skilled.

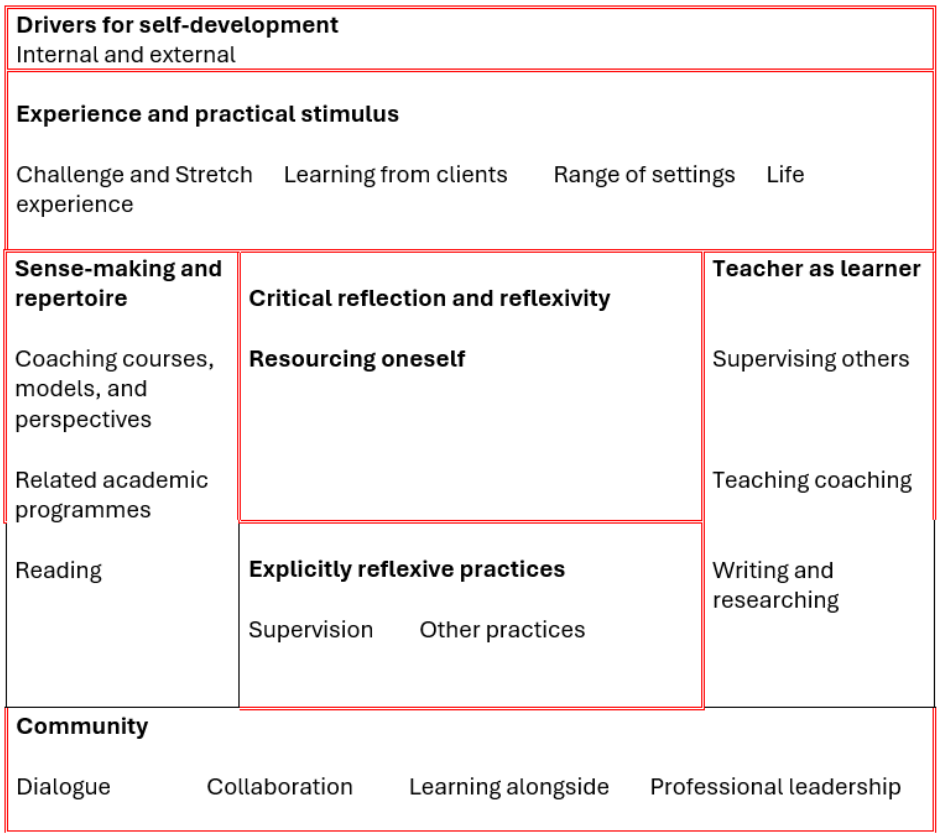
Becoming and being resourced: how they personally resource themselves to be present and grow.

The vehicles of development: what activities and practices they pursue that enable development.

Intentionality and reflexive practices: the approach and mindset that draw their learning together and ensure that growth happen.

First, we present our findings in a heuristic model (see figure 1) to demonstrate what coaches do to learn and develop. We then discussed each category of findings in line with the literature to highlight the contributions of this study to both theory and practice.

Figure 1: an Heuristic – what coaches do to learn and develop



Drivers for self-development

The level of investment, the clarity of its purpose and result, and the nature and length of the overall path of development all varied across our interviewees. However, their own learning and growth was an integral part of all their narratives of being and becoming a coach.

In many cases, the drivers for becoming a coach recurred and continued to give impetus to a coach's further growth. Their reasons for becoming a coach varied widely but were often a serendipitous meeting of external opportunity or necessity, and internal need or appetite. From our interviews, it is noticeable, definitive even, that experienced coaches continue to invest in their development even though they are highly experienced. Many seem to want to go beyond being extremely competent.

This investment seems to be driven by a combination of four inter-linked factors, namely 'character traits', 'needs or personal quest', 'purpose and values', and 'external drivers'. Three of these are internal but, as we shall see, life events and other external changes were highly significant too.

Character Traits

We found that self-development was inextricably bound up with the character, i.e. the identity of the coaches we interviewed**.** They spoke of their enjoyment of knowledge (linked to the need to make sense), curiosity, a learning orientation and simply wanting to become 'more', rather than settling for an adequate, but lower, level of competence.C4 explained:

> *"On [my] masters program, …. if you complete the first year, you have a postgrad certificate and an EMCC recognised qualification. And it covers the foundations and people come out very competent coaches. And for some people, that's enough, …. and then other people will go through to the masters and get really interested and then maybe do their …first piece of primary research and get even more interested".*

Some participants explained simply that learning was an integral part of who they were (D3, C4) and others that they felt a moral imperative to continue to learn and try new approaches. E5 emphasised this by saying:

> *"I felt as you go along, and you will evolve, you will learn more things and you should make it a habit and trying to learn more-new and different forms and approaches".*

E1 emphasised that learning was also essential for staying fresh:

> *"I'm no use to anyone if I get old and stale."*

But more than this, some participants (e.g. D8) linked an orientation towards learning to a mindset, "a beginners mind" and being "a lifelong learner" which are necessary for being a good coach.

Needs, or Personal Quest

Drivers that seemed to meet a need or fulfil a quest gave more colour and specificity to the desire to learn. In different ways interviewees referenced some future state or outcome to which they were drawn. Variously they referred to both a general desire to understand human behaviour or change. Others sought authenticity and what they regarded as the more intimate and deeper connection relative to consulting or training.

A few interviewees, P7 for example, explained how their growth was in part driven by dissatisfaction:

> *"I wouldn't say there are any [particular] sort of moments.... my dissatisfaction with myself as a coach is more internally driven than externally driven…. it's me feeling I want to be the best coach I can possibly be, rather than moments in individual sessions or with individual clients."*

Another interviewee gave the example of dissatisfaction with relying on coaching instruments:

> *"Well, I think a series of bad experiences was really the big thing for me. But I can't really remember waking up one day and saying I'm never using them [instruments] again, but just sort of saying, this isn't necessary. I'm not really with the clients, if I've got this battery of instruments, and is it for me? That was a big question. This seemed to be more for me than for the client." (C1)*

Overall, we observed how our interviewees were driven by a positive reaching for something better or intrinsically worthwhile.

Purpose and Values

The needs described above were often complemented by a sense of purpose and personal values that were more focused on having a real-world impact and an overarching passion for making a difference to clients. These encompassed specifics, like a desire to support people with skills and knowledge, or more general benefits such as meeting clients' social and spiritual needs by providing a reflective space to talk.

Values appear to be more implicit or implied drivers. If you look at the examples of needs and purposes above, many values are involved: for example, intimacy and connection, authenticity, growth and honouring social and spiritual needs. Indeed, needs, values and purpose often seem inextricably linked.

External drivers

The external drivers that the coaches cited reflected the fact that the world that coaches and their clients work in, is changing. One interviewee (P9) explained how in the early 2000s he thought of coaching as a way to change the world, one conversation at a time. After the 2007 crash his work and his purpose became helping people get through life. Beyond such macro events and turning points, others simply recognised that to stay fresh and 'relevant' in a changing world, their practice had to develop.

There is also strong confirmation that 'critical events' of a more personal-professional nature are important. These external events and critical professional experiences seem to provide the nexus within which developmental changes occur. As we show below, these might be often informed or amplified by significant, and sometimes deeply challenge life events.

Becoming and being resourced

Many coaches referred to how they resource themselves to do the work and how they regard this as essential for their practice. It often involves activities and practices that are not about coaching per se but offer an essential resource for who and how they are as coaches. For example, C2 mentioned that:

> *"I need to have different spaces in my life to be in connection with all my clients and [in connection] not only with my coach part or with my professional part, I need to be in connection with my inner child because I may want to be silly."*

This investment is over and above skill development and arguably provides a foundation for it. It involves developing the energy, emotional resources, resilience, mind-set, and self-management needed both to become an experienced coach and to continue to show up and be present as such. C4 explained:

> *"In terms of my readiness for [coaching] it's physical, health, good night's sleep, fresh air, so that I physically feel good, ... for me to engage [my] curiosity, those things have to be in place."*

The resources that interviewees mentioned relate to their personal well-being, their physical health and fitness, to being fresh, grounded, and well-rested. This investment in 'self' enables them to be present in the way they needed to be. Some cited practices such as mindfulness or meditation as a foundation for presence, freshness, and readiness. For example, D8 suggested:

> *"When I coach now, I just have a different way of inquiry, I'm just looking at it differently, I'm showing up differently. And I think that is because of my [meditation] practice."*

Others linked freshness to having a portfolio of professional roles or activities or simply ensuring that they were not bored with themselves. These aspects of being resourceful also acted as drivers for development (constructing a portfolio, staying interested through finding new challenges or approaches). Resourcing oneself is therefore about growth as well as readiness or presence.

Various comments suggest that how one resources oneself changes over time. One interviewee linked this to life stage and life events (P9)**.** Another commented that being resourceful and ready to coach gets quicker with practice (P5)**.** This suggests that the practices involved are both a foundation and anchor for a coach. All who talked about this facet of being a coach implied that resourcing oneself is something that continues to be necessary and worthwhile. It requires ongoing investment.

The vehicles: how coaches pursue or discover their self-development

The ways and means by which coaches develop themselves are many and varied. They draw on or manifest the diverse drivers and personal resources that coaches bring to their work. We have sought to identify some groups of activities, practices and behaviours that help create the growth that all experienced coaches have achieved. Our interviewees combined these myriad vehicles in many ways. Some were planned, some emergent and for some the journey and its components only become apparent in retrospect.

Much of what is offered as CPD takes the form of formal study or workshops. Evidence of CPD is a requirement for coach accreditation, as is ongoing supervision, and buyers of coaching often ask for both.

Looking across the diverse narratives, we identified five broad areas of activity through which coaches developed themselves, namely ‘Supervision and other (explicitly) reflexive practices’, ‘Experience and practical stimuli’, ‘Sense-making and acquiring repertoire’, ‘Teacher as learner’, and ‘The coach in their community’. We describe each of these areas in turn.

Supervision and other (explicitly) reflexive practices

Supervision enjoys pride of place within our schema. A very significant majority of our interviewees attested to the importance of supervision to their development. Indeed, some argued that supervision was both the best source of development and essential to being a good coach:

> *“I feel good supervision, for me, has been the best developer over the last five or six years.” (P5)*
>
> *“… coach supervision is probably so critical for me … you can't be a good coach, unless you reflect on who you are as a person.” (C5)*
>
> *“I cannot find words, to express how much supervision is important. It's the fundamental thing to look at your practice” (P4)*

This power seems to come from how it enables reflexive practice (P6). It deepens understanding and enables the coach to see their practice from a new perspective (P2). It is also a practice that can change over time, achieving greater depth and honesty as the relationship continues (C4).

Supervision provides an opportunity to reflect on a coaching practice or events in a focused and structured way. The dialogue is exploratory and reflexive – looking for whether and how insights and awareness could be harnessed to improve practice. This supports many researchers' claims

for the importance of reflection that we summarised earlier, and it gives specific support to the idea of reflection facilitated through dialogue and social interaction (Brockbank & McGill, 2012).

We will illustrate the different ways in which the other vehicles described below can be, and were, harnessed to facilitate critical reflection. But journalling stands out as a practice designed specifically to support reflection.

> *"[Therapy] got me into a reflective process. And I also journaled a lot. I don't journal every day and consistently, and I have kept all my journals which I wrote in - about 27 journals or so." (C5)*

Experience and practical stimuli

This appears as, a prerequisite for growing as a coach. As we explain below, theory can help with sense-making, but experience appears be the raw material of reflection. Coaches seem to learn from clients and the challenges they bring. D3 mentioned that:

> *"What don't I learn from the client? Everything I know, I learned from them. And then I reflect on it briefly. And so, it becomes my own knowledge and wisdom."*

D9 echoed this view:

> *"The main things when I think I've grown, is where I've actually worked with fairly complex, and what I would call difficult, clients."*

Learning also reflects their range of different clients, and the diversity of settings – including different national settings – within which they have worked. Range and variety seem to be important here. D9 said:

> *"… in the early days, I was definitely taking assignments, or looking for assignments that offered that opportunity to extend my coaching skills."*

The learning may result from coaches' own critical reflection, be highlighted by a mistake or critical moment, and it can be sparked by feedback from clients – both affirmative and critical. Some interviewees reported critical incidents, identifiable experience which prompted specific changes or learning. For example, C3 mentioned:

> *"I've been working with this person for quite a long time [and] they've always done very well. And then they weren't dealing with the demands of their role well, and they became ill. And when they became ill, I was really challenging of myself as to why didn't I notice what was happening. Why was I just dealing with the symptoms of what they were bringing? And it was that that led me to the resilience work. I didn't understand enough about what was happening for them. And that was a really pivotal moment, because it drove me to, first of all, try and understand more, and then eventually, to do a sort of practitioner doctorate."*

More than specific instances, many noticed patterns or changes either in themselves, in clients, in what clients brought or, in the dialogues they were having with clients. These situations provided the raw material for reflection, and as understanding and awareness grew, a spur to re-evaluation, experimentation, and change.

Understanding how coaches' professional experience impacted their development, needs to be set alongside the highly significant ways in which personal life events changed many of our interviewees.

Just as a trainee coach arrives with many skills, attitudes and experiences that can either enhance or challenge their initial development, more experienced coaches might continue to have life experiences, some involving significant changes, that shape who they are and what they become as coaches. Indeed, some of our interviewees identified such events or changes as a significant cause or catalyst for notable changes to their mindset, presence, or approach as a coach. For example, P5 explained how life experiences shaped their coaching practice:

> *"During my 40s, when I discovered coaching and mentoring properly, did my studying, really cut my teeth on working with people, and my children were growing up, I had a marriage, which, sadly, didn't work out, I think all those life experiences added to my wisdom, and how I approached life and perhaps the way I approached my coaching situations".*

Most participants strongly advocate the importance of life experience in becoming an experienced and informed coach and how such experiences facilitated coaches to support their clients. D8 said that:

> *"I have found it helpful to have experienced various difficulties. Because it helps me to empathise, not that I know how someone else is feeling exactly. Age, life experiences, what it's like to move out of a very purposeful career, and struggle through the transition when you thought you were really capable. Going through divorce was one [such experience]. Life experience has given me is a capacity to understand and empathise, but also not to be shocked."*

The findings also seem to reveal a shift in the value-base, purpose, and sense of identity of the coach. P8 put this into perspective saying:

"It was originally a job. It's probably morphed into something being more core to my identity." (P8)

These shifts are marked by greater simplicity, greater clarity, and a convergence between the coach's professional identity and who they are as a person.

> *"I've done quite a lot of work on resolving some of the difficulties I had growing up. And I think that (..) my coaching has developed more, through my own work on myself. As much as anything else."*

Few, if any of these life experiences, could or should be sought out as development opportunities, but it is fundamental to the understanding of coach development to recognise that they exist, they impact and they turn up in how the coach does their work.

It's also important to recognise that life events and coaching can each affect the other. C7 explained:

> *"…the way I started welcoming life, you know, as it is unfolding to me, my understanding of emotions, for example. So, more specifically, I should mention, the way I started interacting with my family – specifically my son and two daughters, with my colleagues at workplace, with my leaders."*

Sense-making and acquiring repertoire

This group of activities includes longer courses on coaching, shorter workshops, related academic programmes (such as Organisational Development or Neuroscience) and self-directed reading.

Many of our interviewees had engaged in some sort of formal programme of coach training, particularly early in their coaching careers. Some form of advanced programme was a feature for a

significant number. As P8 explained,

> *"I had some assumptions myself, and then they were reinforced by some of the things that I was introduced to. And actually, then when you deepen that investigation into it and read more and think more widely...So now I've got a much richer set of possibilities for coaching."*

Some of these programmes were not about coaching per se. They served to help coaches 'join up the dots', deepening and broadening their conceptual and theoretical understanding of what clients bring. C7 stated the significance of such programmes:

> *"… some specific areas, which are not directly within coaching competencies, Immunity to Change for example. So, those kinds of related concepts - understanding human energy more and at a deeper level and I was also doing things in other areas, communication and leadership related."*

Teacher as learner

This sub-category captures the activities where the interviewee's primary role was to share their knowledge or understanding of coaching and/or support another's development. It typically includes supervising other coaches, teaching coaching as part of a formal programme, and researching and writing about coaching and related subjects. C8 noted how supervision facilitated their understanding:

> *"Having supervised other coaches, sometimes you see them using the same set of tools time and time again. [This] makes me more conscious about being light with the tools." (C8)*

Our interviewees showed how engaging in these activities required them to reflect on their own practice. It was necessary for them first, to describe what they regard as good practice and manage their biases; secondly, in response to inquiries or challenges from their 'trainees'; and thirdly, as they observed and learnt about those trainees' practices.

> *"… you need to manage your own biases, when you become an assessor, or when you're a mentor. Probably, to be a teacher, requires a lot of patience, a lot of understanding." (P2)*

Being a teacher of coaching seems to create an opportunity to critically relate their charges' practice to their own: it spurred reflexivity. As teacher or supervisor, they can also learn from another's excellence or invention. So, the teacher becomes the student.

The process of becoming a teacher or supervisor of coaches can also generate reflexive practice. As C4 explained:

> *"[on a supervision course] to see your experience refracted through the other people in the group and to notice your own insecurities and your own projections and assumptions ... it was huge in learning. It was really hard. It was really difficult."*

It seems that, as coaches set out their views on good practice, they re-evaluate what they do, and both practice and 'theory' can change as a result:

> *"Doctoral research was absolutely transformative for me. Because I think what happens is that practitioners are disconnected from research." (D6)*

A point echoed by P6:

> *"I do a lot of my own research, I do a lot of writing on the research and the writing is all a kind of very reflective process, which I think is part of my learning and development … you reflect on it, you learn and collect other perspectives, that's how I develop."*

The coach in their community

Coaches learning in their community is manifest in diverse ways, all involving dialogue and learning from colleagues and peers. E1 said that:

> *"I learn a lot from my science colleagues (…). So, learning from other practitioners (…) I'll be doing some training, formal training in health coaching to do the qualification. (….) I'm a natural nerd. Like, I love learning. I love seeing and I love chatting."*

Learning can take place at, or in the margins of, semi-formal events such as coaching conferences. Interviewees also mentioned the power of informal conversations with other experienced coaches, and others working in related fields. For example, D7 noted that:

> *"I have been involved in peer learning groups, and our action learning sets, or whatever you want to call them. I cross pollinate with other industries."*

Our interviewees also highlighted the benefits of collaborating with peers and learning from more experienced coaches, especially as members of coaching teams. Several coaches also prized the insights gained from professional leadership through a coaching organisation or otherwise.

Various interviewees also commented on how their conversations with us helped clarify and stimulate their thinking and they linked that to a wider practice, for example C8 said:

> *"I think that it is useful very often to have these conversations [this interview], because it helps me to correlate my thinking a little bit more. And because every conversation is different, people will ask questions on a different angle. So, I begin to increase my self-awareness".*

In sum, our findings revealed the importance of community engagement, both formal and informal, for coach development.

Intentionality and reflexive practice

Looking across the myriad development activities and practices that experienced coaches use, we can see that each involves "Intentionality" and reflexive practice.

Intentionality might be important because, as C9 emphasised:

> *"It is misguided to think that simply by carrying on driving for the next 10 years that you will become a better driver".*

Our interviewees spoke of their learning intention as something that can be specific, focused and planned or more open, general, and opportunistic. Although many of our interviewees had followed formal programmes of study, these seemed to be underpinned by a more general intention around learning. This intention is a manifestation, as a mindset, of many of the drivers described above.

This intentionality seems to be an integral part of the reflexive practice that emerges as fundamental to the effectiveness of all the activities and practices we have described. The importance of coaches' noticing and awareness (e.g. the impact of their practice, or what's working

or not, or how clients' needs are changing) was often implicit in what our interviewees said. This might be the raw material of their reflection. C9 said that:

> *"Ongoing reflection is a critical part of coaching development. And that can be through getting feedback from supervision, through post-session feedback, or through, conversation - loads can be from asking clients, 'how did I do?'"*

Some participants also highlighted reflecting on mistakes as a mode of transition. For example, C4 said:

> *"…. making mistakes at every point. And being able to and encouraged to reflect on them. That's definitely helped me transition."*

E2 echoed the significance of reflection for development:

> *"… until you get into reflective practice, you pretty much stay in the competency skill base theory."*

In some cases – in supervision or some formal programmes for example - reflection might be focused and structured. In other cases, it appeared to be more of an emergent, perhaps non-linear, inquiry about one's practice. In both forms, it involves both cognition and feelings. As E5 and C8 explained:

> *"Sometimes, it really takes a lot of time - I'm talking about years, and sometimes it's from one month to the next (...) I wouldn't necessarily say that this is really a conscious process all the time. Sometimes it's more an unconscious thing. You're not aware of doing it differently."*

> *"I'm pretty certain I've seen multiple points [of change] throughout my journey. What tends to happen, (...) is when a bit of my paradigm shifts, either through a conversation with someone, or something has happened. So, [I'm] reconciling my old paradigm with something new. (...) it's [an] accumulation of small little things. And I'm reflecting, mulling over it, and then all of a sudden, something coalesces all these little thoughts into one ball of wax for me, and then I feel that shift."* C8

It appears that, whatever development activities experienced coaches pursue or encounter, a reflexive practice is a prerequisite of continued growth.

Discussion: implications for coaches and coach educators

Our findings have three key contributions that deepen our understanding of how coaches plan and support their development. First, coaches do not arrive with a blank sheet on to which coaching competences will be written: they have diverse relevant skills, personal qualities and knowledge that may be distributed across the hierarchy of competence frameworks. Moreover, they continue to learn and grow from their coaching experience and what is presented to them by life (Kolb, 1984; Clutterbuck, 2010). Therefore, our study extends the significance of considering learning as a social activity (Garvey, 2011; Rajasinghe & Allen, 2010) and suggests that the coach (learner) should be at the heart of any development program.

Secondly, experience alone does not deliver development. It needs to be part of a reflexive practice (Kolb, 1984; Brockbank & McGill, 2012). There are myriad ways in which that practice can be supported, inspired, and informed. Supervision emerges as a strong and common way of achieving this. It is often, and in our view should be, focused on reflection, awareness, and action or change

((Hawkins & Turner, 2017; Bachkirova *et al.*, 2020). Our research implies that other forms of development including CPD, and formal programmes are at their strongest when they include reflexive practice, rather than just specific skills, theories, or models. This complies with Gray's (2007) analysis of reflection in management learning. To be impactful, reflection needs to be more than simply noticing or pondering experience, it needs to come with a critical edge (Brockbank & McGill, 2012). Such critical reflection questions assumptions and social perspectives (including, we notice, coaching norms and paradigms) and encourages learning at a deeper transformational level (Mezirow, 1991). It was also evident that even critical reflection, was not enough to generate growth: as stated by Mezirow (1991) some sort of action or experimentation was necessary. That may be an obvious point, but it makes the distinction between reflection and reflexivity. Growth requires a reflexive practice. There are echoes here of Argyris's concept of double-loop learning as it helps "exploring contradictions, doubts, dilemmas and possibilities" (Gray, 2007, p. 505), can lead to changes in assumptions, mindsets, and ways of engaging.

Thirdly, the skills of reflexive practice need to be taught or purposefully acquired. Reflexive learning requires some skill, supported by good habits. Our study also revealed that that reflexive practice often takes place through dialogue. This dialogue can be with a model, theory, or with another person, as in supervision or in peer-to-peer conversations. It also can be with oneself as a coach compares their practice with what they discover through research or observe in others. However, the importance of 'intentionality' suggests that the mindset and personal qualities of the coach are just as important. Curiosity, openness, courage, energy, perspective, and resilience drive and fuel the desire fully to become a coach. These are in line with Knowles' (1975) and Knowles *et al.*, (2015) notion of andragogy. However, in the coach development literature, these attributes under-represented: a lacuna that our research seeks to fill. We reiterate that courses and programmes, CPD and model-based workshops have a place in coach development. Activities in this category contributes to two main ways to coach development: first, conceptual and theoretical input that can both ground why coaches do what they do and provide frameworks for the 'sense-making' stage of reflexive practice (Mezirow, 1991); and secondly, opportunities to learn and practise new skills and approaches to coaching (Clutterbuck, 2010). Where these two areas are linked, and dialogue between them facilitated, such activities promote and support reflexive practice.

Experienced coaches often discover humility, simplicity, and acceptance that, despite all that they have learnt, they know little. Some talk of adopting a "beginner's mind" which we understand as meaning an openness to learning, curiosity and the ability to respond with spontaneity and creativity (Knowles *et al.*, 2015). That implies that, despite their undoubted expertise and learning, there is always more to learn (or let go). In that sense, coaches are never 'mature', they are always becoming (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2022) and this is a state of being that needs to be continuously tended and supported.

Our interviewees emphasised the importance of reflexive practice throughout their coaching journey. Much of their learning concerns the self of the coach: how they turn up, their preferences and habits, their assumptions, and their strengths. Working on oneself therefore emerges as fundamental to much coach development. It was evident in the internal focus and critical nature of so many interviewees' accounts. To varying degrees, they integrate their insights into what they do and how they work as coaches. And for some, this integration also includes who they are – both as coaches and as people. That possibility of personal transformation seems to make a bridge that can be crossed both ways. As discussed above, a significant minority of coaches referred to how life events and what they learnt from those events impacted their coaching. What we are noticing here is how learning as a coach can in turn impact one's wider life, values, and identity.

Conclusion

The goal of our research has been to fill a gap: to find out how experienced coaches have developed as professionals, and to hear their accounts of that process. Through that, we have been given some insights into how these professionals have also grown as individuals and the crucial interaction and inter-dependency between those two spheres of growth.

The emergent picture is complex and varied. Activities focused on developing competencies contribute, but they are only a part of the rich narratives of development. The motor of development is not the acquisition of more models, theories, and processes, it is continued investment in reflexive practice. So, individual coaches, whether novice or more expert, –might want to ask how they can foster and support that practice for themselves and others.

There is no single path to becoming an experienced coach. This suggests that exposure to multiple possibilities is a good investment in growth. It should not be surprising that for many coaches, development is dialogic. They discover and learn from conversation, as well as from personal reflection. Coaches are almost always solo performers, but it appears that their development depends, in a good part, on relationship, interaction and community.

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