

## The *Coaching Conversation*: Connecting the Classroom and Community

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### Abstract

Teaching and learning in higher education are complex and can be embedded within powerful social learning opportunities for students and the community. Taking advantage of community connections, student learning can be inspiring, empowering, and create new ways of thinking, practicing, and contributing to their communities. Likewise, quality sport coach education enables coaches to think of past, current, and future practices, and provides personalized approaches to becoming a master at the craft of coaching. Using constructivist learning theory in a course entitled “Principles of Coaching”, students collaboratively reflected on social learning and networks within their local sport coaching systems and how these can promote and stimulate ongoing learning. In this report, I share a project in which students created and delivered the *Coaching Conversation*, a half day professional development opportunity for coaches across sports in the community. I explain how principles from constructivist learning theory situate the project wherein a) learning is viewed as development of deep understanding of how to best select and implement strategies to support other coaches in the community; b) there is construction of new ways of knowing and demonstrating knowledge through facilitation skills; and c) reflection happens in and on their own learning as coaches and students. The report outlines how high impact learning strategies can be implemented through projects in higher education to create meaningful peer-facilitated social learning by intentionally connecting students with a network in their community.

**Keywords:** peer-facilitated social learning, constructivist learning theory, meaningful learning, contributions, sport coaching project

In this report, I describe how students collaborate and lead social learning with coaches in their community, learning in the process and helping others learn too. The students were taking a Bachelor of Arts Community Studies (BACS) degree at Cape Breton University. Courses tie strongly to community, and instructors of the courses have maintained tight-knit relationships with local community members and organizations to support student engagement and learning. Students work with one another and community members to understand the complexity of social change (Callary et al., 2018). The core courses of the degree follow process-based pedagogical approaches wherein the focus is on self-directed learning, reflexive intra-personal learning, group and interpersonal development, and experiential learning (Callary et al., 2018). Utilizing a small group environment, students are involved in collaborative problem solving with a commitment to meaningful coursework (Connell & Seville, 2007). A popular major that students take in their BACS degree is Sport and Physical Activity Leadership (SPAL). I teach a 3000 level course entitled: “Principles of Coaching”. Following best practices in facilitating student-coaches’ learning in higher education, the course includes various high impact learning strategies, including being learner-centered, experiential, team-led, project-based, and reflexive (Callary & Gearity, 2020).

Using constructivist learning theory, students in the course collaboratively reflected on social learning and networks within their local sport coaching systems and how these can promote

and stimulate ongoing learning. The outcome of this course was students' work in creating and delivering the *Coaching Conversation*, a half day professional development opportunity for coaches across sports in the local community. Constructivist learning theory specifies that individuals construct knowledge based on personal experience when they encounter novel situations (Chuang, 2021). Through exploration and discovery, learning can be understood as culturally and socially situated, requiring social interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Three principles from constructivist learning theory situate the *Coaching Conversation* project: a) learning is viewed as development; b) there is construction of new ways of knowing; and c) reflection happens in and on action.

### **Learning is Viewed as Development**

Morgan and Sproule (2013) suggest that learners need the freedom to raise their own questions, generate hypotheses, test them for viability, and make mistakes. For this assignment, the students needed to research both practical coaching experiences and literature to find out what topics of conversation are important for local coaches. They were tasked with listening closely to and talking with other coaches (as part of the course, students must coach at least one hour per week to have the experience needed to reflect on their own knowledge as a coach for class discussions). They also needed to scour coaching resources, including peer-reviewed articles, books, and media sources to determine what topics would be salient. They identified five content areas, including the importance of multisport participation, keeping women and girls in sport, the use of technology, injury prevention, and athletes' mental health.

### **Construction of New Ways of Knowing**

Once the topics were selected, the students needed to become the experts on these topics. Using constructivist learning theory, they engaged in challenging open-ended investigations of local sport programs, culminating in outputs that were different from usual student assignments (Morgan & Sproule, 2013). They did not have to present or write a paper to demonstrate their knowledge of the topics. Instead, they needed to be able to facilitate discussion with coaches through the creation of pertinent questions, the provision of relevant resources, and in ensuring that they could stay on topic and redirect discussions when needed. Therefore, students learned facilitation skills that were both appropriate in coaching athletes and in communicating with other coaches. They were also connected to important organizations that could support the credibility of their event, including getting endorsement from the Canadian Sport Institute Atlantic, having coaches receive credit for professional development through the National Coaching Certification Program, and bringing in the regional consultant from Sport Nova Scotia.

### **Reflection 'In' and 'On' Action is the Driving Force of Learning**

Time for reflection and discussion of experiences were crucial aspects of learning, as were mindfulness during action, and engagement in the moment (Sproule et al., 2011). Thus, students were given time in every class to think through the content, schedule, promotion of the event, registration details, event coordination, and evaluation. During the event, they learned from discussions with the local coaches while also learning from taking leadership of those discussions. The students created a short evaluation survey for coaches to complete so

that they could get feedback, including comments like: “I enjoyed the interaction with like-minded individuals”, “I enjoyed the topics picked by the student facilitators”, “Amazing work! Extremely impressed by the professional quality of the event and skilled facilitation by students”. They also wrote that they loved sharing expertise, thoughts, and experiences, and found the event highly informative.

The students had the opportunity to debrief in class and leave comments on their course evaluations. They wrote: “This course was easily one of my favorite classes that I've ever taken at CBU. The topics were so interesting and fit in perfectly with my coaching experiences. I've learned a lot of valuable things that I will continue to use when coaching in the future.”; “This was probably the best course that I have had at CBU...” and “We did a *Coaching Conversation* and it was a hit, and we saw lots of interests for doing it again next year so I hope this continues.”

### **Conclusion**

Learning arises from interaction and dialogue within community (Fosnot, 1996), and this meaningful learning needs to be fostered. In a study of almost 800 Canadian youth coaches, where they rated various sources of actual and preferred coaching knowledge, coaches' highest ratings for preferences included 1) interacting with other coaches, 2) observing other coaches and 3) having a coach mentor (Van Woezik et al., 2021). The *Coaching Conversation* was a powerful social learning opportunity for students and for the community. By taking advantage of community connections, student learning can be inspiring, empowering, and create new ways of thinking, practicing, and contributing to their communities.

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