

An Investigation of Professional Top-Level Youth Football Coaches' Questioning Practice

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To position learners as more central components in the coaching process, scholars suggested that coaches should employ a questioning approach, which may lead to the development of desirable learner outcomes (i.e., increased problem solving and decision-making skills) studies, however, indicate that coaches rarely employ questions within their practice. When questions are asked, these questions rarely move beyond lower-order or 'fact seeking' enquiries. While this research provides information concerning the frequency and in some cases, the type of questions coaches asks, it fails to report the more discursive nature of coaches' questioning approaches. In order to address such limitations, the purpose of this study was to investigate Coach Questioning Practices (CQPs). We recorded the practices of five academy youth level football coaches' subjected the data to a conversation analysis (CA), This enabled the analysis of interaction between coach and player(s). Findings revealed that CQPs, regardless of coach or context followed similar discursive patterns. In particular, three themes presented themselves in each CQP: 1) coaches' requirements for an immediate player response, 2) leading questions for a desired response, 3) monologist nature of coach/player interaction. This showed that the coach positioned themselves as the gatekeeper of knowledge and learners as passive recipients. This reinforces the messages from previous work that has suggested coaches' ideologies inform their practice, and are stable structures that are difficult to change. We concur with other researchers that there is a need for further investigation in this area to better understand how dominant discourse can be challenged.

Introduction

It has been acknowledged that effective coaching positions learners as active agents, or co-learners in the learning process (e.g. Becker 2009; Cushion 2013; Kidman 2005). For this to be realized in practice requires a shift in how coaches conceptualize their role within the coaching process (Light and Evans 2010). Traditionally, coaches have been found to use high levels of instructional behaviours (e.g. Cushion and Jones, 2001; Potrac *et al.* 2007), that limit learners' input (Ford *et al.* 2010) positioning them as passive recipients of learning. For coaches to include learners in the learning process they need to move away from using such high levels of instructional behaviours toward the use of questioning (Davis and Sumara, 2003; Kidman, 2005). For example, through coaches using questions they are able to engage their players in dialogue and discussion (McNeill *et al.* 2008) that in turn enables them to more critically reflect on their performance (Forrest 2014). Furthermore, asking questions potentially develops players problem solving, decision-making, and creative thinking skills, as well as their game understanding (Chambers and Vickers 2006; Wright and Forrest 2007).

Research in coaching from observation studies have shown that coaches, regardless of sport or coaching context, ask players few questions (e.g. Becker and Wrisberg 2008; Cushion and Jones 2001; Potrac *et al.* 2007, *inter-alia*). These studies reveal that coach questioning is a small proportion of their coaching behaviour typically between 2-5% of overall reported coaching behaviours. More recent studies, inclusive of wider definitions of 'questions', demonstrated coaches predominantly asking convergent rather than divergent questions (e.g. Harvey *et al.* 2014; Partington and Cushion 2013). Convergent and divergent questioning develops conditional knowledge (Ennis 1994) of “when, why and under what conditions declarative and procedural knowledge should be used” (p.165); divergent questioning is seen as pivotal in learning to develop higher order thinking. So, questioning is a pedagogic tool that appears rarely employed by coaches, and even when it is, evidence would suggest that the questioning approach fails to cognitively engage players.

Beyond reporting frequency in systematic observation studies, there is limited evidence of how coaches employ questioning approaches in their practice. Interviewing coaches about their behaviours and practice has been a popular method, and while providing insight to why coaches use certain behaviours and practices over

others, coaches' perceptions alone cannot be relied upon to give objective accounts of coaching practice (Partington and Cushion 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which top-level youth coaches used questioning in their practice. The study looks to extend previous studies in coaching that have captured only the frequency and the nature (i.e. convergent or divergent questions) of coaches' questioning – and largely not considered the players response or the conversational nature of such coaching moments. To this end we aimed to capture the question-response exchange that occurs between coach and players and describe this as coach questioning practice (CQP).

Given that coaching can be recognised as an educational and pedagogical endeavour (Jones, 2006) and the limited research that explores coaches' questioning approach, educational research offers a lens to examine the appropriateness of coach questioning to meet desired outcomes (e.g. problem solving, decision-making, opportunities to reflect on performance). For example, research suggests that teachers formulate the majority of questions, with these being more fact-seeking in nature, rather than requiring students to think beyond the recall of information (i.e. a small number of higher order questions) (e.g. McNeill *et al.* 2008; Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Da Silva Lopes 2011). This questioning structure has been identified as initiation, response and evaluation (IRE) (Cazden 2001). Topic or task related sets of IRE are the most common discursive patterns reported in educational settings, including physical education (Cazden 2001; Wright and Forrest 2007). Metzler (2000) argues that lower order, fact seeking questions, which are characteristics of IRE require “less knowledge and ability for making responses” than higher order questions that “build on the knowledge from the lower-order” (p.108) and engage “analysis, synthesis and evaluations skills” to generate new knowledge (p.107).

A number of assumptions and issues arise from these findings that require further exploration when thinking about coaching. First, there is an assumption that the level of question and type of cognitive processing required is fixed and can be generalized independently of the subjects and their context (Yang 2006). The players' (learner) experience and cognitive characteristics, the content and purpose of the question, and the relevance and meaningfulness of the content to the player will all impact on their learning (Pagliaro 2011). Moreover, questioning practices are subjective interactions that involve a range of complementary pedagogic behaviours,

such as body language, giving time for answers, encouraging or discouraging of learner contribution, and discussion (Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Da Silva Lopes 2011).

This suggests that, to understand more about the nature of CQP questioning cannot be reduced to frequency and cognitive level alone, but instead needs to be considered as rooted in coaches' and athletes' differing knowledge, concepts and ideological beliefs about coaching and learning (Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Da Silva Lopes 2011; Prain and Hicky 1995; Yang 2006) – thus recognising that coaches' understanding of learning, their assumptions and beliefs, and their ontological and epistemological underpinnings acting often implicitly, informs their practice (cf. Cushion 2013; Light 2008). In addition, there are recognizable and traditional discursive practices in coaching; rules, conventions, and dispositions that control coaching that are based on “tradition, circumstance and external authority” (Tinning 1988, p.82; Harvey *et al.* 2010). Thus, the internal relationship between conceptions of coaching and learning will impact how coaches perceive the functionality of questions and the degree to which they understand and apply this approach to their pedagogy (e.g. Cushion 2013; Harvey *et al.* 2010; Light and Evans 2010; Partington and Cushion 2013; Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Da Silva Lopes 2011). Therefore, an analysis of CQP is also a useful indicator of underlying assumptions, beliefs and conceptions of coaching and learning. However, analyzing coach interactions as routine patterns of communication does not interrogate fully the ideological determinants and outcomes of these patterns (Prain and Hickey 1995). There remains an ideological aspect to coaching where discursive practice involves power, and control of when, where and by whom (Cushion and Jones 2006; Potrac *et al.* 2007) – not least in CQP – where ideological beliefs can act to “negatively influence and retard the perspectives” (Crum 1993, p.344). This lends further weight to the need for in-depth qualitative examination of coach questioning beyond its ‘type’ and ‘frequency’. Therefore analysis of CQP offers a way to describe and interpret practice at the micro level of coaching interactions, while also providing insight to ideological influences in terms of coach assumptions and suppositions - thus providing a deeper analysis of coaching’s discursive patterns.

In this case, qualitative conversational analysis (CA) offers a useful tool to interpret coach-player interactive patterns (Groom *et al.* 2012) and allows a broader consideration of CQP beyond behavioural data about ‘frequency’ and ‘type’. CA was

pertinent as CQPs were characterised as ‘conversations’ as coach and player undertook a process of ‘turn-taking’ (Gréhaigine *et al.* 2005). Therefore, this method allows consideration of how interaction is initiated, how individuals earn the right to speak, the degree of freedom individuals have in what they say, how often individuals speak and how communication is controlled (Prain and Hickey 1995). Considering CQP in this light provides interesting insight into the discursive practice and conceptual orientation of their interrelationship – as well as description of the learning environment being created. So far, research into questioning has lacked empirical evidence from *in situ* or ‘natural’ coaching environments. For example, Wright and Forrest (2007) and Forrest (2014) provided examples of the qualitative nature and dialogue that occurs between teacher/coach and learners/players when different types of questions are asked. However, these studies ‘manufactured’ questioning practices to show the types of questions a practitioner *could* ask, and subsequent learner responses, reporting only half the story and leaving the relationship between conceptions of practice and learning, and actual practices unclear. Therefore, there is a limited appreciation of the contextualised and situated nature of questions asked by coaches, and, crucially, the responses given by players that create particular learning environments.

Methodology

Study Context

The study was set inside a professional English youth football academy. In England, academy clubs are the place where youth players identified as talented are nurtured with the aim to prepare them for full-time professional football. The Premier League operates the academy system with each academy required to implement the ‘developmental pathway of players’ (The Premier League Elite Player Performance Plan 2011). The developmental pathway is comprised of three distinct phases; the foundation phase, the youth development phase, and the professional development phase. The foundation phase is from under 9’s to under 11’s, the youth development phase is from under 12’s to under 16’s, and the final phase, the professional development phase is from under 17’s to under 21’s (The Premier League Elite Player Performance Plan 2011). The participants in this study coached players from under 10’s to under 14’s crossing both foundation and youth development phases.

Foundation phase players are provided with between 5 and 8 hours of coaching and weekend competitive matches each week, increasing to between 12 and 16 hours in the youth development phase.

Participants

Participants were five male academy football coaches who were homogeneously sampled, which is a type of purposive sampling that investigates the practices of those who have shared similar contextual experiences. All coaches were required by the club to have attained the Football Association (F.A.) level 3 (UEFA B) and a full F.A. Youth Award. The following section provides an overview of further qualifications and characteristics specific to each of the five coaches involved in the study. All names used are pseudonyms.

Tom

Tom was 32 years of age at the time of study and coached the under 10's. Tom had four years coaching experience in this setting and another eight years professional coaching on Fundamental skills at participation level. He had a postgraduate level education in strength and conditioning, and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

Will

Will was 36 at the time of study and coached the under 12's. He had been coaching for 12 years of which 4 have been spent in this setting. Will left school at 16 and therefore had no formal higher educational qualification beyond those he had in football.

Oliver

Oliver was 28 at the time of study and coached the under 14's. He had ten years coaching experience of which five years was in the current setting. He had a postgraduate level qualification in sports coaching and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

Joe

Joe was 26 at the time of study and coached the under 11's with Paul in an official equal role. This meant that both were responsible for designing and delivering

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practice, and matters regarding team selection. Joe had four years coaching experience all in this setting. Joe had a degree level qualification.

Paul

Paul was 45 at the time of study and coached the under 11's. He had eleven years coaching experience, three years in the current setting and six years at two other professional football clubs in youth development. His qualifications included a degree level qualification, and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

Data collection and procedure

To enable qualitative analysis of CQPs, three practice sessions for each coach were video recorded during the middle of the football season (fifteen in total). Video recording each session allowed for more detailed analysis, as it enabled each session to be reviewed an infinite number of times. Three sessions enabled an accurate representation of the coaches' practice (Brewer and Jones 2002). In total 1215 number of minutes of coaching was recorded with each session lasting on average 81 minutes. Broken down, Tom was recorded coaching for 239 minutes, Will for 248 minutes, Oliver for 231 minutes, Joe for 252 minutes, and Paul for 245 minutes. CQPs were distributed relatively evenly amongst the coaches, with Tom initiating 44 CQPs, Will 52, Oliver 46, and Joe and Paul 53 each.

Post-observation field notes were used to enable us to report on matters linked to the CQPs, and the coaches' wider discursive practices. For example, what was the purpose of the session, what activities were undertaken, what was the nature of coach-athlete interactions? Specific to questioning for example, why did the coach initiate the CQP, who was the intended recipient of the questioning? It was determined that a CQP occurred when there were any form of a questioning-response exchange between coach and player(s). So, this could have been limited to only one question followed by one response with only one player, or equally it could have been a series of questions followed by responses from a from a number of players within that particular CQP before the coach engaged in some other form of intervention (i.e. instruction or feedback). In this sense, CQPs varied in time (six seconds – one minute 32 seconds) and length (one question and one response – thirteen questions and ten responses).

Data analysis – conversational analysis

To appreciate, and maintain the complexity of coach-player interactions through the CQPs, a CA approach was employed. CA reveals interactions ‘as they are’ (Groom *et al.* 2012, p. 230), as the concern is not only with what has been said, but also how it was said (Hepburn and Bolden 2013). This was vitally important in the context of this study, to not only understand the frequency and type of questioning, but also coaches’ complementary pedagogic behaviour and discursive patterns, including for example how they asked questions, and the time they gave athletes to respond that contributed towards the learning environment constructed. Furthermore, CA was an appropriate approach to use in the context of this study, given its focus on in-situ recordings of the coach/player interaction (Mondada 2013). Indeed, given the connected nature of interaction between coach, player and environment Groom *et al.* (2012) advocate CA as a powerful analytical device to further understand sports coaching.

The CA analysis followed the procedures and transcription symbols offered by Groom *et al.* (2014) (see table 1). Two members of the research team reviewed the recorded sessions independently. Initially, two complete reviews of each session were undertaken. In the first review each CQP was transcribed. This included the question initiation, the sequence of questions asked and responses given. The focus of the second review was the lead in to the question and how the questions were asked including notes of the coaches’ wider discursive practice. This included such things as the tone of the coaches’ voice, the extent to which players were being encouraged to respond to questions, and how coaches reacted when players failed to answer a question. To ensure the credibility of the data, two further reviews were undertaken by the same two members of the research team (Hastie and Hay 2012) as well as peer-debriefing sessions (Patton 2002). This ensured researcher reflexivity through discussing the separate analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). Where differences did occur in the analysis, the same two research members reviewed the video again before reaching a point of confirmability (Harvey *et al.* 2015).

Insert table 1 here of conversational analysis symbols

Results

In total 248 CQPs were subjected to CA. This represented 158 minutes out of 1215 minutes of the coaches total practice time, which equated to approximately 13% of their overall time being spent on questioning. The data are presented in the form of CQPs or ‘vignettes’ enabled by the employment of a CA approach that include detail from the notes taken during the coach observations. Presenting data in this way reveals the complex nature of social interactions and the micro-reality of coaching practice (Jones 2009), and also retains the authentic nature in which questions were asked.

On reviewing the CQP data, which included the contextual information, a number of themes were identified. These were: 1) coaches’ requirements for an immediate player response; 2) leading questions for a desired player response, and 3) monologist nature of coach/player interaction. However, these themes were not particular to certain CQPs, but rather occurred within CQPs. For example, it was not the case that theme one occurred in 40 CQPs, or theme two occurred in 50 CQPs. Rather, these themes appeared to give some structure to all of the CQPs, regardless of the number of questions and responses, or the lead up to, and purpose of the questioning. So, there was limited variability in the CQPs, with each following similar patterns, regardless of coach or session. For the purposes of this study, and to better present and understand the data, we present a CQP and link it to each of the three themes. We then offer a general discussion, which connects data with theory.

Coaches’ requirements for an immediate player response

CQP 1

The session has been running for an hour. The coach stops the practice and shouts for all of the players to come to him. The coach had already stopped the players on eight previous occasions to give feedback/instruction e.g. “There needs to be greater intensity in some of your movements off the ball”, as well as providing feedback and instruction while the players were practicing e.g. “move faster”, “get that ball in an be positive”. The players gather around the coach, who stands quietly waiting for all the players to listen .

Coach: What did we start off with (.)

Player: = Footwork and :: movement

Coach: What did the lads in the bibs do all the time (0.7)

Player: Dribbled

Coach: What did we take boys from the first bit (2.5)

Player: When you've got the ball look around you and give accurate passes °

Coach: = What did we move onto then (.) when we put another red in, what was the decision we had to make (1.2)

Player: Make it quicker ::

Coach: What was the passing then (1.4)

Player: Harder, longer passes

Coach: = Did you find that easier then (2.1)

Player: {I didn't because it was a smaller area and it was four vs. three}

While this period of questioning was directed to the whole group, the players were not required to cluster around the coach. Instead, players had 'frozen' on the spot at the point at which the coach stopped practice. Players were dispersed within the playing area. At this point in the questioning episode, which had been going on for approximately 20 seconds, six of the players' have turned to what is going on in other sessions that are going on at the same time. However, as the coach directs his questioning to only those responding, he does not notice some of the players not paying attention.

Coach: What did we have to do when two balls came across (0.8)

Player: QUICKER REACTIONS

Coach: Was it chaos all the time (1.4)

Player: Yes, but organised chaos

Data highlighted that coaches often required players to provide immediate responses to questions they had asked. In this CQP, players were rarely given more than two

seconds (e.g. ‘What did the lads in the bibs do all the time (0.7)’) to provide a response to a question. This indicated that players perhaps knew the answer that their coach wanted to hear as a consequence of instruction provided by the coach earlier in the session. When responses were not immediate, coaches often acted to fill in the players’ silence (e.g. ‘= What did we move onto then (.) when we put another red in, what was the decision we had to make (1.2)’). In many instances, the coaches used self-answering and rhetorical questions where players had little time to think about their responses.

Questions that promote critical thinking require player’s to consider a number of responses before selecting an answer they feel to be most appropriate (Daniel and Bergmann-Drewe 1998; Wright and Forrest 2007). However, for players to be able to consider their responses, rather than expecting immediate responses, coaches need to allow time for reflection (McNeill *et al.* 2008), as well as allow players the opportunity to discuss answers amongst themselves. Wiersema and Licklider (2009) talk about the need to provide opportunities for learners to ask questions of themselves and others as this results in greater levels of learning; to think and reflect more deeply about their performance.

Time is required for critical thinking and reflection to happen (Chambers and Vickers 2006). The CA showed that coaches in this case rarely provided players with time to think about their responses. As already discussed, when an immediate response was not forthcoming, coaches filled the silence with an answer or re-initiated through a re-phrased question. McNeill *et al.* (2008) argues that inexperience tends to produce too many questions in quick succession, and this does not allow time to reflect on possible answers and their consequences – while the coaches in this case cannot be described as ‘inexperienced’ it could be argued that their experience of a less directive and more questioning approach was limited. Indeed, research has indicated that coaches are unable to facilitate well or conduct instructional conversations, not knowing how, having never experienced sufficient guidance, nor seen effective models in action (Cushion 2013; Light and Evans 2010; Partington and Cushion 2013).

Leading questions for a desired response

CQP 2

Players are engaging in a modified game after waiting for 4 minutes while the coach explained how he wanted the activity to run, and the players role. Just over 3 minutes into this activity the coach stops practice after seeing one of the players perform exactly how he had instructed them to

Coach: SO what have they done to help him (1.2)

Player: <Moved>

Coach: SO if he comes in this way what might you three do :: (0.8)

Player: °Get out of the way°

Coach: Okay, so what did you do↑ (5.1)

Silence, the players stand and stare at the coach failing to give a response. The coach responds to the silence by immediately re-phrasing the question.

Coach: Did you wait for him to come to you ↑, or did you pass it early (1.2)

Player: >Waited for the defender<

Coach: So when he waits for the defender, <what is it harder for that defender to do> (4.4)

The coach has his hands out in front of him, as he looks at every player waiting for an answer to be given but no players respond; they stare at the coach. The coach continues to look around the group waiting for a response from someone. When it doesn't come the coach re-phrases the question.

Coach: So if he comes here as the defender, and then he passes it, >is it easier or harder for him< (0.8)

Player: Harder

Coach: (.)WHY

Player: °Because he has to run over to chase the ball°

Coach: So when he is running across what do you need to

Player: - Run across to support him.

This CQP shows how a number of the coach's questions were 're-initiation' i.e. re-phrased questions when there was no response or not the desired response to a question. For example, in this CQP the coach asked 'Okay, so what did you do↑ (5.1)'. When players failed to provide a response the coach rephrased the question to 'SO what have they done to help him (1.2)', which a player was then able to offer a quick response. This is synonymous with an IRE questioning framework where the coaches' asked 'test' questions to illicit a predetermined 'correct' response (Wright and Forrest 2007). Cazden (2001) notes that this predictable routine can easily become 'recitations' rather than genuine discussion, or verbal interaction with the development of new understanding. Data also showed that coaches prolonged the final word of some of their questions or there was a rise in intonation ('SO if he comes in this way what might you three do :: (0.8)'), meaning players were being led to a certain response. When this occurred, the players' gave much quicker responses ('>Waited for the defender<') as they appeared to more clearly understand the response the coach wanted to hear. Thus, the frequency of questioning appeared relatively high when coaches adopt this approach 'real' interaction and hence potential for learning was actually limited (Harvey and Light 2015).

In most cases, the CQP failed to move beyond recall or leading in nature, requiring players to produce an answer from memory (Siedentop and Tannehill 2000). Thus, the verbal role of the players was not generative and individual interpretation was not encouraged. However, analysing the data using a CA approach revealed a greater detail of information concerning how coaches structured the CQP. For example, where players were unsure of their response, their answer was delivered in a much softer tone ('°Get out of the way°') than when they were confident they were giving an answer they believed their coach wanted to hear.

Monologist nature of coach/player interaction

CQP 3

The coach is half way through his session with the under 12's. This particular part of the practice is a conditioned game and has been running for just over two minutes. During that time, the coach had regularly intervened by

instructing the players what he wanted them to do, something common to every practice session observed. For example:

“Adam, you need to move further up the pitch”

, “Liam ‘run faster with the ball”

After a series of these instructions had been given the coach stopped the entire practice.

Coach: TOMMY JUST STOP AND COME OVER HERE

Tommy instantly comes rushing over to where the coach is standing.

Coach: When did I say we needed to run with the ball (2.1)

Player: >When your head is up <

Coach: When else? ↑ (1.8)

Coach: Should I run with the ball now -

Coach: Should I run with it now -

Player: (.) ° No

Coach: Why (0.8)

Player: Because they are not looking ↓

Coach: > Okay, but why else wouldn't I <

Player: It's a tight angle (?)

Only Tommy is being asked these questions. While the coach speaks with him, five of the other players in the group are talking amongst themselves, with a group of three observing what is going on in sessions going on elsewhere. The remaining five players are listening in on the exchange between the coach and Tommy.

Coach: -Yes, but why else? (.)

Coach: - Have I got loads of space there (?)

Player: ° No

Coach: = {No, so I need more little touches which means I wouldn't run so fast. If I am here now, have I got loads of space}

Player: ° No

Coach: So do what instead then (1.0)

Player: Turn back and start again

Coach: So you need what to run with the ball ::

Player: Space ↑

Coach: >Good get back in there<

As Tommy quickly runs back to where he was originally standing, the coach asks him a final question.

Coach: TOMMY, DO YOU HAVE A BIG TOUCH OR SMALL TOUCH WHEN YOU HAVE LOTS OF SPACE (0.7) ↑

Player: BIG ↑

In the discussion of the previous theme it was demonstrated that players were involved in recitation rather than discussion, as the evaluation phase of CQPs was often brief or non-existent and the focus appeared on the coach leading the questioning. What also occurred was the sequential nature of question followed by response without the coach exploring players' answers further. For example, in this CQP, the coach asked a question ('When did I say we needed to run with the ball (2.1)'), which was followed by an instant response from a player ('>When your head is up <'), before the coach proceeded to ask a further question ('When else? ↑ (1.8)'), without exploring the player's first response in any great depth. Mortimer and Scott (2003) argue being dialogic occurs when teachers engage with learners' ideas, expressed by a question and/or an answer and, consequently, stimulate the learners' intellect. A non-dialogic teacher-learner interaction occurs when the teacher does not explore the learners' idea or perspective and/or does not stimulate further reasoning to generate new meaning (Mortimer and Scott 2003).

In the present study coaches did not engage with the players and the questioning was non-dialogic in this sense – the CQPs appeared as an instrument for and of the coach, rather than being dialogic and using questions to explore players' concepts and promote interpretation of information (Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Da SilvaLopes 2011). The CA data showed how coaches' talk sometimes immediately followed that of the players, or overlapped that of the players or even themselves in order to cut what players were saying. This occurred when players did not give a response that the coach wanted, as based on instructions given throughout practice, and so sought to ask another question, which would eventually lead to players providing the coach with the 'right' answer that the coach wanted to hear. Therefore, the coaches' low dialogic reaction formed part of their complementary pedagogic behaviour, illustrating that the quality of questioning involves creating a dialogic climate, and is not just about the frequency of questions asked (Harvey and Light 2015). Wright and Forrest (2007) suggest that learners' ability to discuss components of their performance most likely demonstrates their ability to successfully play the sport. It is of note that none of the CQPs led by the coaches in the present study encouraged players to discuss their responses with each other. Instead, coaches controlled the CQPs dictating when players could and could not speak.

Discussion

Coaching norms provide an overriding, powerful, and historical view of what coaches *should* do and what coaching *should* look like (Cushion 2013; Cushion *et al.* 2003), particularly in elite, or developmentally elite contexts (Potrac *et al.* 2007). One such norm suggests that the coach *should* be positioned as the authority and responsible for decision-making (Cushion 2013; Light and Evans 2010). The data in the present study like Groom *et al.* (2012) demonstrated that players were passive recipients who tended to intervene only when solicited by the coach and never on their own initiative. The CQP illustrated an unequal encounter where players were not offered the opportunity to decide when to speak and had to wait to be acknowledged. Hence coach-led and dominated encounters were evidenced, the coach acting overtly as the gatekeeper of knowledge in a didactic style that resulted in the coach not the players acting as adjudicator, and the coach playing a central role as the only authority of learning - the coach as 'expert' (Cushion 2013; Prain and Hickey 1995). The player's learning, skill acquisition, and understanding was through a coach-centred

transmission of subject-specific vocabulary, where the coaches mediated every exchange. Such an approach not only reinforces coaching norms but also is unlikely to encourage players to interpret or elaborate understanding or prompt deeper reflection and participation in learning (Cushion 2013; Prain and Hickey 1995).

The data showed that CQP occasionally resulted in questions directed to individuals but these questions were still asked in the presence of all players. While whole group questioning is important to allow reflection and hence meaning making (Light 2002) it is less significant in players understanding than inductive questions for individuals or small groups during practice (McNeill *et al.* 2008). A further issue with a whole group questioning approach reported from the CA data is that when questions were directed at certain players only, other players paid little attention. This can be seen in CQP three, where a group of players turned their attention to another coaches' practice while their CQP was taking place. Indeed, it is a false assumption that individual responses elicited from questions asked in whole-group settings reflect the depth of understanding across the group, while whole-group questioning is ineffective at instigating personal decision-making (Harvey and Light 2015; McNeill *et al.* 2008). To meet individual learner needs, it has been proposed that questions should be asked to individuals or smaller groups (Crowe and Standford 2010; McNeill *et al.* 2008). Curiously, while often advocated as 'player-centred', and appearing to emphasise the individual, questioning as evidenced in the present study was a 'one size fits all'. That is, regardless of individual learner differences, the same CQP with very little variation was deemed sufficient. However, not all learners are the same, nor are circumstances and contexts and advocating a singular whole group approach to questioning seems to contradict athlete centredness, and deny, or minimize, individual difference (Cushion 2013; Yang 2006). Seemingly positioned as active learners with different needs, learner subjectivity was, in fact, suppressed as the recipients of a universalised learning framework where decisions were made by the coach (Sicilia-Camacho and Brown 2008). CQP should reduce rather than maintain the power differential between player and coach through joint involvement in decision-making (Kidman 2005), yet CA data from this study would suggest the opposite occurred.

Given the link between coaching and learning conceptions, assumptions and presuppositions and adopted coaching practices, questioning practice can be a useful indicator of the main coaching and learning conceptions of a coach (Pedrosa-de-Jesus

and Da Silva Lopes 2011). Traditional coaching pedagogy has a number of underlying assumptions that are framed by a positivistic paradigm underpinned by behavioural conceptions of learning (Cushion 2013; Light 2008). This results in coach-led and coach controlled practice sessions that are less dialogic, interactive and one-directional, with the coach positioned as expert and athletes' passive receivers of information (Cushion and Jones 2014; Potrac and Cassidy 2006). The presuppositions in CQP discourse suggested that the coaches assumed that, as the expert, they must emphasize skill acquisition and maintain close control of the discursive possibilities of the session. Thus the coaches controlled the turn-taking contributions of the players and ensured that a 'necessary' focused closed agenda was maintained – the coaches agenda. This dominant discursive pattern served to establish, maintain and naturalize the positions of power and authority for the coaches (Cushion and Jones 2014). Interestingly, the coaches used 'we' during CQPs that appeared to imply a shared role for the coach and players, however the coaches were the dominant agents and authority for learning throughout (Cushion and Jones 2014; Prain and Hickey 1995).

A dominant coaching ideology appeared evident throughout CQP where the coaches seemed to fail to recognise or understand the contradictions in conceptions of coaching practice and athlete learning using questioning versus an authoritarian and direct/behavioural approach (Cushion 2013; Light and Evans 2010). Several authors coin this as coaches' 'epistemological gap', the use of an approach but with limited conceptual or practical understanding of it (Davis and Sumara 2003; Light 2008; Partington and Cushion 2013). In uncritically accepting this ideology, coach's focus little attention on how learners internalize their participation or the formation of long-term knowledge, also overlooking the potential of language interactions as a resource for learning (Prain and Hickey 1995).

Developments in youth coaching profess a deliberate shift from traditional coach-led pedagogical modes to more non-didactic approaches including changes in practice types and game forms. To this end, the governing body have introduced a series of 'Youth Modules' with the purpose of developing coaches in a manner that enables them to structure sessions where players are able to learn through trial and error as coaches use a more questioning based approach; with 36,000 coaches reported to have completed two out of the three part course. However, the present study supports longitudinal research by Stodter and Cushion (2014) that these changes

are not being realized. Coaches are strongly committed to these innovations and attempt to change coaching content and practice structures (Cushion 2013; Partington and Cushion 2013; Stodter and Cushion 2014) but in reality the present study supports Stodter and Cushion (2014) with the notion that ‘deep structures of communication’ remain largely unaltered; with only make surface-level, if any, changes to their coaching practice. A crucial issue in this respect is that coaching beliefs are stable structures that are particularly difficult to change (Light and Evans 2013; Streaan *et al.* 1997), and coaches come to value certain types of knowledge over others (Cushion *et al.* 2003). Therefore, coaches appear unable to change discursive practices or challenge ideologically driven coaching behaviours and attitudes.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to observe coaches during their daily coaching and provide ‘authentic’ or ‘real-life’ questioning practices with the aim of analysing qualitatively CQP and its wider discursive patterns. Data revealed that while coaches engaged their players with a higher number of questions than reported in other studies many of these did not enable players to develop their critical thinking skills, or take responsibility for their learning (Wright and Forrest 2007). So, while questioning has been associated with an athlete-centred approach to coaching, deeper analysis shows CQP’s to be coach-led. In developing players a wide spectrum of questions and a dialogical approach alongside complementary pedagogical behaviours is necessary to challenge players knowledge, techniques, skills and strategies. If CQP is ‘ineffective’, players lose out on abilities to ‘defend, reflect on, examine or analyse their performance’ (Cleland and Pearse 1995, 33).

By using a CA approach to analyse data, we were able to move beyond examining the type and frequency of questions asked by coaches to consider the discursiveness of the interactions between coach and player(s). This showed how coaches allowed players little time to consider a response to the question asked, and when a response was not immediately given, coaches would re-phrase the question in an attempt to lead players towards the answer, or answer the question themselves. Where this happened, the result was an automatic response given by players as a consequence of earlier instruction provided by the coach. Furthermore, coaches would exercise their authority over their players by controlling the question/answer

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exchange, and dictating when players were permitted to talk. While a CA approach has enabled us to report the interactions that occur between coach and player, we concur with Groom and colleagues that further work is needed in coaching to understand this further.

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