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Social Learning Spaces in Support of Women Coaches in University Sport

By Rachael Bertram and Diane M. Culver

Introduction

Etienne Wenger-Trayner, a globally recognized thought leader in social learning and communities of practice, along with his colleague Jean Lave, coined the term “Community of Practice (CoP) in the book *Situated Learning*. Later, in *Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: A conceptual framework*, he wrote that “the formation of a community creates a social space in which participants can discover and further a learning partnership related to a common domain ... The key characteristic is the blending of individual and collective learning in the development of a shared practice.”

As researchers Diane Culver and Rachael Bertram discovered, CoPs have engendered a multitude of powerful positives for participating coaches and sport organizations: enjoyment, connecting, sharing, bonding, motivation, and creativity, all in a safe environment and all essential elements of a productive and successful coaching career. At present, CoPs in university sport are largely an American practice. Because there is no apparent reason why such a social learning space cannot succeed in Canada, the *Journal* urges Canadian university athletic departments to investigate and, we hope, implement the practice. – Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

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This article reports on research that examined how women university coaches were supported through their participation in a social learning space. After introducing the concept and methods, we provide evidence of the ways in which their participation influenced the coaches. Finally, we make recommendations for those wishing to support women coaches in their coaching practice.

Since the passing of Title IX in 1972, the number of collegiate women athletes in the United States has increased from around 16,000 to 180,000 in 2012. However, in that same time frame, women head coaches of these athletes decreased from about 90% to only 42.9%. Researchers suggest that Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS – now called U Sports) is in a similar state; in 2011, women held only 19% of the head coaching positions of female teams, a figure which declined to 17% by 2013. As well, between 2011 and 2013 in U Sports, the number of male head coaches of women’s teams increased from 66% to 68% and male head coaches of co-ed teams from 79% to 82%. Thus the portrait of women in leadership positions in U Sports is disturbing.

Researchers have suggested that this decline is due in part to women’s exclusion from social networks, an under-investment in social capital, and a lack of women role models and mentors. As a result, negative outcomes for women coaches and athletes have been reported. For women coaches, these include detrimental mental and physical outcomes as a result of feeling alienated, pressure to over-perform and conform to organizational norms, and increased risk of discrimination. For women athletes, a lack of female role models in visible leadership positions has been shown to lead to the devaluation of their abilities and self-perceptions, and a falling short of career aspirations and potential.

To more effectively recruit and support women coaches in their coaching roles, researchers have suggested that sport organizations establish mentorship opportunities; connect young women coaches with their senior counterparts; provide women coaches with an opportunity to interact with other coaches; and help women coaches share their stories with one another.

One approach that fosters all of these development opportunities is a community of practice (CoP). A CoP is a social learning space made up of a group of people who share a passion or set of problems about a topic and connect on an ongoing basis in an attempt to deepen their knowledge and expertise. Being a member of a CoP goes beyond just participating in community activities. Active engagement in the practices of the community means that members, in figuring out how to be within the community, are constructing their identities.

Using the CoP concept as the framework, our research focused on exploring women coaches' perceptions regarding the influence of participating in such a social learning space on their learning and coaching identity. We found five CoPs nested within American university athletic departments: three included only women head and assistant coaches, one included only women coaches and supporting agents, and one included both men and women coaches of female sport teams. From the five CoPs, we interviewed five head coaches, three assistant/associate coaches, two administrators, one coordinator of player development, and one strength and conditioning coach. All but one worked in a NCAA Division 1 athletic department; the exception worked in a NCAA Division 3 athletic department.

The themes we searched for in interviews included:

- Immediate Value: when CoP members benefit immediately; for example, enjoying themselves, receiving affirmations of their coaching practices
- Potential Value: when value is gained and has the potential of being applied in the future; for example, learning strategies that can be used in future situations
- Applied Value: when CoP members make changes to their practices; for example, implementing a new coaching strategy
- Realized Value: when applying new strategies or modifying existing ones produces improvements in performance or performance achievements; for example, observing positive outcomes
- Reframing Value: when CoP members reconsider their definition of success or learning objectives; for example, reassessing indicators of success

Although we searched for data that reflected these themes, additional themes that did not align with these five were allowed to emerge.

The women's experience

The quotes in this section illustrate how the coaches gained value throughout their participation in their respective CoP.

All of the coaches reported that they enjoyed participating in the CoP meetings (Immediate Value).

Heather said: "I really enjoyed it. It was a great part of my day and it made me feel good. Even if I didn't say anything in the meeting and just observed, it felt good."

Lisa observed an improvement in the members' mood: "They're happier. They felt like others cared about what was going on with them."

The coaches claimed that participating in the CoP helped them realize that they were not alone in the challenges they face. They realized they shared many of the same challenges and obstacles.

Heather said: "I learned that I'm not alone. We had a great year, but we also had a lot of challenging issues come up. It makes you think you're by yourself; you're the only one with players who are causing these issues. There are little things that, of course, will happen. But, it felt

like, ‘gosh, why is our team so different? Why are the other teams getting along so well.’ Then, you actually sit and talk in a safe zone like this, and you realize you’re really not alone.”

The coaches felt their CoP provided a safe space for them to talk about issues they were not comfortable bringing up in other situations. This allowed them to connect and bond. Krista felt this was important for the participants’ motivation and creativity:

“I think we’re more motivated and more creative, and able to be more positive when we feel like we have a community of like-minded coaches out there who are going through the same experiences you are, whether a big victory or loss.”

Many of the coaches discussed how they shared best practices, ideas, information, and strategies related to coaching. They added these elements to their coaching repertoires for future use (Potential Value).

Marissa mentioned: “The [CoP] has taught me techniques, coaching philosophies, different views, how a coach coaches, and different ways to handle different athletes. And not just in my sport.”

Candice stated: “I’ve learned more than I ever have learned, just outside of X’s and O’s.”

Learning about each other’s strengths helped them identify who was good at what within the group, which helped them short-cut the process of finding information by knowing who to approach with particular problems or when in search of specific information related to coaching. Sharing strategies and discussing coaching techniques also led the coaches to feel more confident; this was due to the fact that they received affirmations and recognition when sharing their coaching practices and philosophies.

Candice said: “Just knowing that other coaches in other sports are doing the same thing makes me more confident ... that what I’m doing is good.”

Each CoP had members who mentioned that the CoP gained recognition at the university and among their male counterparts:

Krista said: “As a group, we have developed a better relationship with the [athletic director]. He is much more aware of the challenges we face, and it is easier for him to understand where we are coming from. He touches base with us pretty frequently ... We have even been approached by some of the male coaches. They see that we have good ideas too and want to join our meetings. “

Amongst themselves, the coaches noticed they developed a culture:

Lisa noted: “It definitely goes beyond one or two relationships, and it creates more of a culture. And that culture is definitely positive.”

All of the coaches discussed making changes to their professional practice (Applied Value). They modified existing practices and implemented some of the techniques, ideas, and best practices discussed inside and outside of the meetings with other group members. As a result, many of the coaches noticed improvements in their performance (Realized Value).

Heather noted: “You really do become a better coach and a better person. I think it’s really beneficial.”

Lisa recognized that she was able to resolve organizational issues more quickly.

Candice stated: “I have a lot more patience, a *lot* more patience. And communicating – I think the communication between my players and me, and my staff, has been 100% better.”

While some coaches could not identify areas where their performance had improved, they knew they were improving:

Marissa said: “It’s just brought so much. [The CoP] has helped me out in areas that I’m not aware of, until they’re actually brought up.”

After implementing new strategies or modifying existing ones and noticing improvements, the coaches assessed and reassessed how they viewed athlete development and their own personal development (Reframing Value). First and foremost, they realized the importance of learning through social interactions. They also either became aware of or reinforced their concept of what matters in terms of athlete development at the university level. For example, the coaches recognized that, although winning was emphasized in their departments, they needed to stay focused on other aspects of athlete development throughout the entire season. Furthermore, they reframed how their personal development fit into their professional practice.

Candice stated: “At one point, I didn’t have a single weekend off. If other coaches had recruits, I was meeting with them. I realized that I have to find a way to balance that out, but still be able to help ... Learning like this is more important to me now. It is 100% important, whereas before, I didn’t focus on it as much.”

It was also evident that through participation in the social learning spaces, the coaches experienced transformations in their identities; they realized that coaching could indeed be a career that allowed women to have families. For example, one coach said that seeing other women in the group who were mothers helped her understand that she could coach and be a mom at the same time and that she now felt confident she could do the same.

Recommendations for implementing CoPs to support women coaches

1. **Increase awareness about the benefits of CoPs and encourage coaches to create them.** Our findings show that when coaches and administrators are aware of the benefits of CoPs, they can implement them within university athletic departments. Ideally, however, those responsible for coach development would initiate these efforts rather than leave the creation of CoPs to chance.
2. **Ensure that there are leaders or proponents among the group.** All of the CoPs we explored had at least one facilitator who initiated the group and motivated the members to begin and continue participating. The coaching research suggests that having a facilitator is essential to the success of a CoP. We found there was an additional benefit when the facilitator was more than just the initiator and in fact was an active participant in the CoP. The CoPs we explored either had one facilitator or coaching staffer who maintained the group, or had rotating facilitators based upon the given topic of the upcoming meeting. For most of the meetings, the facilitator(s) would let participants know the topic ahead of time and ask them to come ready to discuss best practices and issues related to the topic. The facilitator(s) would also come prepared with these notes, and then lead the discussion for the meeting.
3. **Encourage members to take on various roles within the CoP.** A number of roles can be filled that contribute to the effectiveness and success of the CoP. Key roles include community keepers, who ensure all members are able to fully participate, critical friends, who reflect on what works and what does not, and social reporters, who help generate a history of the CoP. In the CoPs we explored, it was common for one member to serve as the social reporter, somewhat of a hub for storing and sharing documents amongst the group. This helped members know exactly who to contact to gain access to and/or share resources. These are examples of roles that can be filled within the CoP, but it remains up each CoP to develop a unique structure that will work for its members and stakeholders.
4. **Provide or attain support from stakeholders.** The CoPs we explored had somehow gained support from the administration at their respective university. This support ranged from providing meeting rooms, connecting with the CoP, and providing snacks or meals for meetings to providing funding to help support members’ learning and development and allowing a select number of members to attend an annual coaching convention.

5. **Help CoP members recognize the value they are creating.** We found that helping the coaches recognize the value they created by participating in CoPs reinforced their commitment and motivation to continue participating and contributing. Reflecting on what value the members have created may help them to better understand the complex ways in which they are being affected by their participation and the value they are creating. In addition, it may be an important step for gaining additional and continued engagement from CoP members.

Conclusion

Our purpose was to present research that explored how women university coaches were supported through their participation in a social learning space. From the findings, it is clear that the coaches gained considerable value by participating in their respective CoPs, value they mentioned may not have been created in any other setting. A main finding was that the coaches were able to make connections and build relationships with other coaches, which helped them to learn more about coaching and add to their coaching repertoire. Researchers have stated that one limitation women coaches have, both in Canada and the United States, is the lack of access to peers and experienced mentors. Participating in CoPs allowed the coaches to access both peers and mentors, and to develop long-lasting bonds with others. The coaches also discussed making changes to their coaching behaviours and the way in which they approach their individual learning needs, focusing more on learning through the social interactions with others in the CoP.

While our research was conducted with women coaches in the United States, scholars have argued that Canadian women coaches also face serious challenges, including a lack of mentoring opportunities, women role models, and access to information. Our findings show that engaging in CoPs helped the coaches find mentors and role models, as well as gain access to important and relevant information. Therefore, we argue that CoPs and other types of social learning spaces can and should be considered in Canada as an approach to support women coaches in their coaching endeavours and career pursuits.

About the Authors

Diane M. Culver, Ph.D. is an associate professor at the School of Human Kinetics, in the faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests are coaching and coach education, social learning theory, and qualitative research methods. Published in journals such as *The Sport Psychologist* and the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology and Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, she is also a member of the editorial board of the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching* and a reviewer for several journals. Diane's previous working experience includes coaching for the Canadian National Ski Team and the New Zealand Olympic Ski Team. She consults with athletes, coaches, and sport organizations facilitating the enhancement of their performance.

Rachael Bertram recently defended her PhD in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. She holds a master's degree in sport psychology, and has many years of sport experience as an athlete, coach, and researcher. She has consulted with sport organizations and businesses on the creation of development programs and the supervision of coaches and has published several articles relating to social learning.

References available upon request