

Coaching at a developmental level

Informed practices are not limited to teaching

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Youn's doctoral research explores the impact of STEM outreach programmes, as part of the Lord Bhattacharya Engineering Education Programme (LBEEP). Youn hopes that his research will aid the impact evaluation of LBEEP and provide a blueprint for future outreach programmes. He is particularly interested in informal and signature pedagogies as well as the learning environment that they take place in. Youn has been a Graduate Teaching Assistant in WMG for over a year and is the current women's coach at UWHC.



Abstract

In this article, I reflect on a semester of coaching handball at the University of Warwick. Discussions revolve around creating a training session plan, delivering a training session, and coaching participants with differing goals. I hope to introduce developmental sports coaching in the context of university societies to an academic audience and showcase an alternative pathway to teaching for the PGR community.

Keywords: Developmental coaching, university societies, informal learning, learner-centred learning, session planning

Background

Handball is a contact sport played between two teams; each team consists of six outfield players and one goalkeeper. The goal of the game is to outscore your opponents, within the time limit (Two thirty minutes halves for official games, often shortened to one half of twenty minutes at developmental level) (see EHA, 2018 for more details on

handball). I have now played handball for five years as a goalkeeper.

Last semester (Spring 2022), I took on the role of Women's Captain at Warwick Handball Club (UWHC), and one of my main duties is to lead training and fitness sessions. Table 1 shows the sessions in a typical week, all of which occurred at the University of Warwick's Sports and Wellness Hub (University of Warwick, 2022a). I usually lead at least

one training session as well as a fitness session, as part of a four-person coaching team.

One of the reasons I took on this role was to enhance my teaching skills as I view sports coaching and teaching to be very similar. I also wanted to embed some teaching practices from my role as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) into coaching, such as the use of a lesson plan and assistive technological tools.

Introduction

Sports coaching at a developmental (or beginner) level is a fine balancing act between introducing beginners to a new sport and pushing for improvement from more experienced members and ultimately *winning* (Arce & Arce-Trigatti, 2000). This is the precarious task that sports societies coaches are faced with at the University of Warwick. Due to societies being entirely student-led, such coaching is carried out mainly by students, on a voluntary basis, without pedagogical guidance (It is worth noting that a few “popular” sports such as swimming and football have paid coaches) (WarwickSU, 2022). This is

despite the parallels between sports coaching and teaching, including the skills required of a sports coach or teacher to succeed in their respective role, such as effective communication, and the focus of both being acquisition and/or application of knowledge and/or skills (Penney, 2006; Jones, 2007; Cassidy *et al.*, 2008; Evans, 2010).

Coaching in university societies is a long-standing practice and one that is common across UK universities. However, informal sports coaching offered in university societies is underexplored in the literature. In this article, I draw on my experience as a GTA in Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG) and reflective practices I have developed in the APP PGR course to showcase coaching from a pedagogical lens (University of Warwick, 2022b).

This article will discuss three main topics:

1. An insight into my preparation for a training session,
2. A training session from my lens as a coach,
3. Reflections on a semester of coaching at UWHC

Table 1: Handball weekly sessions

Monday	
Tuesday	1.5 hours experienced training session
Wednesday	
Thursday	1 hour beginners training session + 2 hours intermediate training session
Friday	1 hour fitness session
Saturday	
Sunday	2 hours game practice training session / inter-university friendly games

Training session preparation

To ensure a successful training session, adequate preparation is required. In sections 3.1-3.3, I provide an account of session preparation as well as some of the key aspects/dimensions to take into consideration whilst doing so. My preparation for leading a training session involves three key elements:

1. Engage with online material,
2. Create a (training) session plan (see Appendix 1),
3. Communicate with other captains.

Engage with online material

From my experience, I cannot stress enough how beneficial it is to engage with online material as a coach. I usually scour handball dedicated pages on Instagram as well as official websites, such as the International Handball Federation (IHF) and England Handball Association (EHA), for drills, tactics, and warm-up routines before creating a session plan (EHA, 2022; Instagram, 2022; IHF, 2022). Recently, I discovered a mobile device application, called HomeCourt (Nex, 2022). HomeCourt was originally designed for basketball practice and one of its uses is to improve one's reflexes. Reflex is one of the fundamental attributes of a handball goalkeeper (Struzik, 2020; Salhe *et al.*, 2021). To innovate, I trialled the app with goalkeepers at a training session. There was some initial reluctance as using such an app was a novelty for participants. Besides, the app requires some calibration which can be cumbersome. However, in subsequent sessions, participants were more receptive to using the app and the app is now integral to our goalkeeper-specific training, which occurs weekly during the drills phase of a training session (see the following section) whereby goalkeepers and outfield players train separately. An additional benefit of the app is that it

enables multiple players to practice simultaneously, given all participants have a mobile device, whereas traditional exercises require rotation of goalkeepers.

Create a training session plan

It is not a requirement to create a session plan. However, session planning helps mitigate some of the obstacles that may be encountered when delivering a session. Moreover, a written version is a useful reminder when delivering a session. The structure of my session plan (see Appendix 1) includes learning objectives (highlighted in yellow), coaching/learning activities (highlighted in green), strategies to check participants' understanding (highlighted in blue) and coaching aids (highlighted in orange). My *session* plan is thus very similar to a *lesson* plan, as described by Milkova (2012), both in structure and use. One notable alteration is that I usually divide coaching/learning activities into three phases:

1. Warm-up: This phase is a choice between "boring" stretching (see "Dynamic stretches" and "Static stretches" in Appendix 1) which reduces the risk of injuries and "fun" exercises (usually playing another sport such as basketball or a game such as "Tag" at a leisurely pace) that increases participants' motivation from the onset. In the interest of time management, I divide warm-ups into two further sections in the session plan: initial and handball specific warm-up.
2. Drills: This phase is where the learning objectives are covered (and hopefully met). Aspects of this phase are akin to a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) classroom whereby the level of guidance varies across sessions and

individuals alike (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

3. Game practice: This phase allows participants to put into practice what they have learnt in the previous phase, with more autonomy.

Dividing a session plan in this way is mainly due to personal preference; it reminds me to cater for each phase adequately and to exert better time management when delivering a session.

Beyond the structure, there are three key aspects I take into consideration when creating a session plan:

1. Time management: This is a key aspect of leading a session, as sessions are time limited, with the shortest sessions being only ninety minutes. Time management is required throughout a session. For example, if warm-up overruns, it leads to a shortened drills phase which then results in learning objectives to less likely be met. Towards the end of a session, if game practice overruns, the ending of a session is chaotic as the time slots for the sports hall are strict. An important tip when session planning is to account for small tasks such as setting up drills and drinks breaks.
2. Participants/flexibility: Perhaps the trickiest aspect to prepare for as the number and identity of participants are unknown to me until I deliver a session. Considering the nature of drills and the sports hall facilities, the ideal number of participants is between fifteen and 30. The identity of participants matters as they may be of different experience and abilities, which require adjustment in both coaching and learning activities. In mitigation, I usually include

several likely *what if* scenarios in my session plan, such as dividing participants into two groups if attendance exceeds fifteen.

3. Teamwork/role of other captains: In the interest of time management and to cater for all participants, seeking assistance from other captains during sessions is recommended. In session planning, this translates to assigning roles to other captains to avoid ambiguity and confusion during a session, and subsequent communication (see next section).

Communicate with other captains

There are three other captains who coach alongside me. The coaching arrangement is similar to two types of co-teaching models, depending on the context:

1. Across sessions: As there are multiple training sessions a week, different sessions may be led by different captains. This is similar to sequential teaching, whereby individuals lead different lesson phases (Cook & Friend, 1995; Scruggs *et al.*, 2007). Constant communication is required within the team as continuity is desirable across sessions. Indeed, to ensure learning objectives for a particular session are met, they usually need to be revisited or built upon in the following session due to time constraints (see Appendix 1). In practice, this translates to using an online group chat to share resources, ideas, and lesson plans amongst other agendas.
2. Within sessions: Session leaders usually require the assistance of other captain(s) to deliver a successful session. Assisting a session includes coaching one

half of a session during warm-up and drills (which can be harder when the session is designed by someone else) and refereeing for a segment of game practice. This is similar to the assistant teaching model whereby a teacher has an assistant, such as a GTA, to perform various tasks including technical support (Simons *et al.*, 2020). This arrangement is agreed upon prior to sessions. It is always preferable to have a face-to-face meeting before such a session to ensure everyone is on the same page. This meeting is also beneficial for team morale and ensures whoever is leading the session to feel well supported.

Ultimately, this arrangement allows the four of us to carry out this coaching role along with our other commitments and to prepare adequately for sessions due to the reduced workload. However, it has its own challenges, namely that of interdependence between captains and a complex management of tasks, especially when they cannot be equally distributed. Simons *et al.* (2020) also reported such challenges in similar co-teaching models.

Leading a training session

Leading a training session is a way to showcase all the preparation that precedes it. However, as a session occurs in an informal learning environment, there are more uncertainties than one would expect whilst teaching in the classroom. In this section, I narrate and explain a ninety-minute training session, as described in the exemplar template (see Appendix 1) from the lens of a coach (leading the session). It builds on some of the aspects I have introduced in the previous section.

Build up

It's always important to start a training session with a positive mindset and lead from the beginning. *Personally, this translates into arriving at the Sports and Wellness Hub fifteen minutes before the start of a session. In that time, I will gather the equipment (such as balls, training cones and First-aid box) needed for the day and wait outside the sports hall (training venue). This provides an opportunity to welcome and engage with participants, especially if it is their first time.*

Warm up

I ensure that we are five minutes into a session before carrying out the formal introduction of the coaching team and the session. This allows everyone ample time to get ready (and get the chit-chats out of the way). This "formal start" is crucial to setting the tone for the session. Thus, I try my best to be assertive during the introduction. There is a balance to be struck between being approachable and ensuring some formality to the session, depending on the composition of participants (i.e., be more approachable if the session is predominantly new participants).

For this exemplar session's initial warm-up, stretches are chosen over exercises. I personally prefer stretches, as they can be targeted to specific muscles and reduce the risk of injury (see Behm & Chaouachi, 2011 for more details on stretching and how to optimise stretching to avoid injuries). Another aspect is that stretching gives more control to the coach; for example, it is easier to adhere to the time structure I have set out in the session plan. However, it requires more attention than exercises. *During the initial (stretches) warm-up, my role is to not only showcase stretches but also to constantly adjust the pace and selection of stretches in such a way that everyone can easily follow.* Based on personal

experience, I know that one can feel isolated if they cannot keep up with a group especially from the start of a session.

Following this phase of the warm-up, and a short break, the group is divided into two for a handball-specific warm-up. This mainly involves shooting at the goal and allows goalkeepers to warm up their hands (in the literal sense). The group is randomly split into two to speed up this phase as only one goalkeeper can warm-up at a time and we usually have five to six goalkeepers. *During this stage, I encourage participants as much as possible as it can be demoralising to miss a shot on goal.*

Drills

The drills phase is usually thirty to forty minutes. Moves that are covered in this exemplar session are called “crosses” (see EHA, 2018 for more details on crosses). Participants are in groups of three for this move, and beginners are paired with more experienced members. The key to crosses is constant communication between players as it involves interchanging of positions within a group. It is tricky to coach this move to beginners as on one hand I want participants to take their own initiative and independency but on the other hand I have to factor in that participant might not feel comfortable to interact with others. *Thus, I will usually adjust my level of input across groups in this phase.* This scenario is akin to teaching a mixed abilities class, whereby there is an extra emphasis on teaching to be learner-centred (see next section for further discussion) (Hallam & Ireson, 2005).

Another aspect I monitor is repetition of drills. If a drill is performed too little, participants do not master a move but too much time spent can end up with participants losing interest. *Here, I will use a drink break whenever I deem*

appropriate to extend the interest of participants. Moreover, towards the end of the drill phase, I like to give participants more autonomy; I usually encourage “free play” scenarios.

Game practice and aftermath

Finally, the game practice consists of a handball game, which lasts between fifteen to twenty minutes. *In this phase I perform two roles simultaneously, acting as both a coach and a referee.* My role as a coach involves making substitutions, which is crucial in ensuring every participant has equal playing time (as handball is limited to 14 players at a time), whilst refereeing mimics a match scenario and avoids disputes. However, the game practice is perhaps the most enjoyable phase for participants, and it is very rewarding as a coach to watch moves being put into practice.

The last five minutes of a session are reserved for club announcements, usually regarding social activities and friendlies. At the end of the session, my last task is to ensure that equipment is packed safely into the allocated lockers.

Reflections on a semester of coaching

My first aspect of reflection is a learner-centred approach to coaching. There has been a recent recognition of this approach in both coaching and teaching, which allows for a more holistic development of learners, by embedding transferable skills such as teamwork, as it is more engaging and flexible than “traditional” approaches, which tend to be prescriptive (Felder & Brent, 2009; Nelson *et al.*, 2014). In this context, a learner-centred approach could also aid to constructively align session aims beyond the sport, to wider student outcomes in higher education.

On occasions, I have inadvertently adopted this approach, by trying to be as

flexible as possible when it comes to session planning to accommodate for participants of different experience and abilities. I have also provided one-on-one support and adjusted my coaching approach (e.g., level of input during drills, pace of delivery throughout a session) on numerous occasions.

However, in the lead up to tournaments, it has been challenging to accommodate beginners into training sessions, especially as this was a low percentage of participants. Whilst beginners would be supported throughout a session (see next paragraph), the complexity of drills would perhaps be too advanced. Going forward, we would like to mitigate similar situations. For instance, another captain has created an introductory playbook which beginners can then use to familiarise themselves before attending a session. I am also open to more practical approaches such as separating participants in smaller groups during a session and altering drills to accommodate for this.

Another aspect worth reflecting upon is the informal interactions between paired beginners and experienced players during sessions, akin to peer learning in teaching. Currently, beginners are paired with more experienced members (usually another captain or executive member, selected during session planning) at the start of a session (for one-on-one help), especially when participants are predominantly experienced. However, the gap in experience and ability between paired peers can have a negative impact on both individuals. The more experienced peer may feel they are being held back by their partner which may result in discontent within the team, whilst beginners may compare themselves to their experienced partner which may result in self-doubt of their own abilities. Ultimately, this may lead to lower retention of beginners and perpetuates a divide between participants based on

abilities. This goes against the ethos of UWHC and the university.

Topping (2005) acknowledges similar issues with peer learning that are implemented without contextual considerations. Considerations include characteristics of the “helper” and if peer learning is enforced or voluntary (ibid.). In this instance, a mentoring training session would be useful to offer “helpers” guidance with peer learning. Bryant & Terborg (2008) and Lewis *et al.*, (2021) note an improvement in self-efficacy amongst participants that experienced mentor training. This improvement then leads on to a better performance in the respective “teaching” role (Lewis *et al.*, 2021).

My first semester of coaching was full of ups and downs. From the women’s team winning the summer cup tournament to the men’s team losing in the “final” and training sessions going slightly wrong at times. All in all, it has been a rewarding experience that has boosted my confidence in both teaching and coaching going into this academic year. I hope to draw upon the experience of coaching within a team when co-teaching and to incorporate student-centred approaches such as PBL into my teaching.

Conclusion/final words

I hope this introductory article gives an insight into coaching in a university sports society. My aim with this article was to bring attention to a topic which is perhaps (unfairly) disconnected from the academic community and to provide a blueprint for future coaches in a similar position to me. This article also showcases the value of postgraduate training courses such as APP PGR and their application beyond teaching. In particular, I appreciate the encouragement to self-reflect and learn from informed practices, which in this instance has allowed me to somewhat

disentangle this “messy pedagogical practice”, known as coaching.

Lastly, I believe engaging with societies and coaching provides the perfect opportunity for the postgraduate teaching community to practice and improve their teaching (time permitting!)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the UWHC executive members for all their help in training sessions. I would also like to thank my old peers and mentors from the University of Manchester Handball Club for introducing me to the sport and sharing so many amazing memories. A special mention to Vafa Ahmadiyah, Vlad Bucur and Sam O'Cionna for their amazing friendship and guidance.

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Appendix 1

This is an adapted example of a session plan for a ninety-minute intermediate training session that I led in June.

Session Designer	Youn Affejee	Session Leader	Youn Affejee
Learning Objectives	By the end of this session, participants will be able to... <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Perform single and double crosses in attack 2. Defend against single and double crosses 		
Initial warm-up plan			
16:05 – 16:15	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce team, session and learning objectives 2. Dynamic stretches (perform for 1 hall length): Jog, high knees/butt kicks, shoulder arm circles (forward and backward), crab walk, hamstring sweeps, forward lunges with rotation followed by sumo and narrow squats at halfway point, Run at increasing speeds *3 3. Static stretches (perform every movement 3 times): Walkouts with shoulder taps, world's greatest stretch, mountain climbers, child's pose into cobra stretch (only once), alternate reverse lunges, sideways lunges, alternate ankle hops 4. 2 minutes water break 		
Goalkeeper and shooting (Handball specific) warm-up plan			
16:16 – 16:30	Split in 2 random groups if at least 15 outfield and 2 goalkeepers present <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Goalkeeper warm-up (repeat for any additional goalkeeper present): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. Shoot at goalkeeper's hands from 9metres mark II. Shoot alternate top corners from 9metres mark III. Shoot alternate bottom corners from 9metres mark IV. Goalkeepers advance towards shooters – shoot at goalkeeper's hips from 9metres mark V. Outfield players move to 2 of their preferred positions and attempts a shoot at the goalkeeper from 7 metres 2. 2 minutes water break - set up for main lesson with other captains. 		
Drills plan			
16:31 – 16:55	Split into 2 groups (based on experience) if at least 15 outfield and 2 goalkeepers present <p>Intermediate group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 3 vs 3 (with goalkeeper): Set up: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. Set cones to restrict play to only centre of the pitch. II. 3 players assigned as defenders – hand out training bibs III. Attackers line up in 3 positions (centre, left back & right back) at halfway line (see video for description of a handball court). IV. Explain drill (see description below). 		

	<p>Description of drill: Attacking team will initiate free play until the centre signals a single cross. A single cross (see IHF document for explanation) is then performed followed by a shot.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. This scenario is repeated for double crosses. 3. When participants are comfortable with both type of crosses, they can be used interchangeably. 4. 2 minutes water break <p>Note: Rotate defenders throughout drill. Add an extra attacker (pivot) at own discretion.</p> <p>Experienced group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Same set up as beginner group with the addition of empty and wing-back crosses.
16:56-17:10	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 3 vs 3 fast break: <p>Set up: similar to previous drill but attackers start at the opposite goal.</p> <p>Description of drill: Attacking team will initiate free play until the halfway line. The centre then signals a single or double cross. A cross is then performed followed by a shot. Attackers then become defenders.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. 2 minutes water break – set up for game with other captains.
Game practice plan	
17:11-17:30	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 15 minutes game with emphasis on performing crosses. 2. Cool down with announcements of upcoming events
How will participants’ knowledge or achievement of the learning objectives be checked?	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. New moves to be employed in game. 2. Next session to build on moves. 	
What equipment are needed for this session?	
Balls (size 2 & 3), cones, First-aid box, training bibs, handball goals,	
How can the Handball executive members assist?	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assist with carrying equipment before and after session. 2. Welcome any new members and help them throughout session (wherever possible offer 1 on 1 help). 3. Other captains: assist throughout session – take charge of 1 group, referee game. 4. Social secretary: announce upcoming social events at the end of session. 	
<p>Will you include participant feedback for the session? Yes, via anonymous training feedback form</p>	
<p>Has this session been peer reviewed? Yes</p>	

To cite this article: Youn Affejee. 2022. Coaching at a developmental level: informed practices are not limited to teaching. *Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice*, 2, 93-104. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/jppp.vol2.2022.1234>