Managing Participation Within a Novice Coaching Context

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Abstract

This paper explores membership within a Research Higher Degree community designed to develop expertise in the field of managing athlete behaviour in a novice coaching context. Employing literature, methodologies and data analysis techniques associated with postmodern ethnography the author provides insights into a journey from novice to expert within a research community of practice. Through relating the dissertation process with professional experience a narrative is presented that captures the tensions, ambiguities and potentialities associated with occupying different forms of membership within a research community of practice. Conclusions are drawn relating to how the structured nature of authoring a dissertation can be informed by the dynamic, sometimes unstructured and unpredictable forms of participation experienced.

Introduction

Due to the fact that communication is an integral part of the RHD journey, it is no surprise that comparisons can be made between the journey of a novice to expert coach and the journey from a novice to expert researcher. Not only is it the researcher’s ability to communicate their ideas in written form in the dissertation, it is also the researcher’s ability to communicate within a research community of practice (Brown, Finger and Reeves, 2007). Specifically this research community of practice includes fellow RHD students, supervisors, academics and various community members required to act as participants in the RHD journey.

Current trends in the literature highlight the role of communication as being a prerequisite to effective coaching (Salmela, 1995; Kellett, 1999). Throughout this paper, the term coach will be referred to in a sporting sense (as in the researcher’s PhD studies) and in a research sense, as the journey undertaken from novice to expert can be analogous to development of expertise as outlined by Bloom and Schinke (1997). Bloom and Schinke (1997) administered a study into the communication styles exhibited by sports coaches. Specifically, they investigated the disparity of communication styles in relation to the four developmental stages of coaching. The four stages being the: novice coach; developmental coach; national elite coach; and international elite coach. Through analysis of the data, Bloom et al. (1997) identified that when asking elite coaches to recollect various periods of their coaching development, they were able to describe changes in their
communication styles and techniques. The same can be said for the RHD journey in the research community of practice (Brown, Finger and Reeves, 2007). The novice researcher’s ability to communicate in every sense of the word evolves from simplistic to sophisticated.

Embedded in Bloom et al.’s (1997) research were issues pertaining to the role of communication in coaching. Specifically, questions were raised such as: is communication classified as one of many behaviours required to become an effective coach? This paper explores this question in relation to the development of my expertise in a research community of practice.

**Basic Communication**

Martens (2004) identified three dimensions of communication: sending and receiving messages; verbal and nonverbal messages; and, the content and emotion of communication. The first dimension highlighted above is imperative for coaches to master.

The use of verbal and nonverbal messages is of equal importance to that of sending and receiving messages. However, central to communication in a research community of practice is that which involves content and emotion (Rodriguez-Farrar, 2006). Specifically, content is the substance of the message and emotion is how you feel about it (Martens, 2004) As a coach in the public eye, it is important to manage both the content and emotion of a communication to remain in control of the situation and the athletes. As an RHD student it is important to manage both the content and emotion to remain in control of membership within a community research practice.

Martens (2004) identified six steps to the communication process. This process initiates at the ideas formulated by the coach, progressing through to the reaction and interpretation of the athlete. This paper utilises Martens (2004) to describe my research journey from the ideas initially formulated at Confirmation of Candidature to drafting a PhD thesis. Table 1 outlines Martens’ six steps of communication and situates them within a research community of practice.

There is a substantial amount of literature and academic interest in the RHD journey which predominately concerns itself with the technical aspects of a doctorate. The literature tends to concentrate in a number of areas including: selecting a topic area; choosing a supervisor; the difficulties of supervision; and the process of writing a dissertation (Graves and Varma, 1997; Pearson and Ford, 1997; Phillips and Pugh, 2000). There is however limited literature regarding what Bencich, Graber, Staben and Sohn (2002) refer to as emotional or intellectual experiences. It is the intention of this paper to portray these aspects of the Rhd journey through the researcher’s experiences. Specific areas of interest include technical experiences, emotional experiences and intellectual experiences, which will in turn unearth the tensions, ambiguities and potentialities experienced throughout the researcher’s journey.
Table 1 - Six steps in communicating to athletes

(Adapted from Martens, 2004.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Coaching</th>
<th>RHD journey</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step One</td>
<td>The coach has thoughts, feelings, ideas, intentions, that they wish to convey to the athlete.</td>
<td>Initial stage of RHD journey, developing ideas for topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step Two</td>
<td>The coach translates these thoughts into a message suitable for transmission to the athlete.</td>
<td>Theory phase - Designing the research proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Three</td>
<td>The coach conveys the message through a verbal or nonverbal channel.</td>
<td>Confirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Four</td>
<td>The athlete obtains the message if they are paying attention to the coach.</td>
<td>Relational phase – relationships with supervisor and other RHD student relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Five</td>
<td>The message is understood by the athlete. The interpretation is dependent upon whether the athlete comprehended the content and intent of the message.</td>
<td>Implementation of the research project - Method, data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Six</td>
<td>The athlete reacts internally to the interpretation of the message.</td>
<td>Communal phase - Drafting of dissertation</td>
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Methodology

The research design employed in this paper is exploratory. It is about providing new insights, meaning and descriptions in order to clarify, comprehend and interpret or explain my RHD journey from the application to the authoring of the thesis. The focus is on naturalistic inquiry or naturalism, as the research was conducted in the everyday setting of a university research community (de Laine, 1997).

To understand the perception of the novice researcher, an approach was required that would capture contextual dimensions that were embedded within the research community of practice. These contextual dimensions highlight the tensions, ambiguities and potentialities experienced during the RHD journey. In order to achieve this objective a postmodern ethnographic approach (Geertz, 1973) was identified as most appropriate for exploring the researcher’s perceptions and experiences. This approach enabled the exploration of the social situation and cultural practices of a research community of practice. Primarily, it employs local narratives for the purpose of reconstructing the reality of the RHD journey.

In particular, the research endeavours to reorganise the everyday experiences of the RHD journey to construct a story from which themes can be identified for analysis. These themes provided a mechanism for
unearthing the shifting context of the RHD journey and for shedding light on the tensions, ambiguities and potentialities involved in the RHD journey.

Data Collection

It is intended that the experiences of the researcher through her RHD journey to the current time will be explored. Specifically: diary entries of the journey; interactions with supervisors, academics and fellow RHD students; and, feedback both verbally and written on draft submissions of the dissertation. All of these forms of data were analysed and emerging themes were identified. This was accomplished by using a form of thematic content analysis called open coding (Glaser, 1998).

The objective of open coding is to produce emergent themes and their properties which fit, work and are applicable for contextualizing the RHD journey. As the specific themes were constructed, they were categorised into the tensions, ambiguities and potentialities experienced during the RHD journey. These categories allowed the researcher to see the context of participation and the forms of membership experienced through focusing on particular experiences recorded in the local narratives constructed within the texts of the diary entries, interactions with others, and feedback from draft submissions of the dissertation.

Results

The data was interrogated until enough information emerged to develop core themes and their properties. The data explored used Martens’ (2004) steps to communicating and the adaptations of my RHD journey as situated within a research community of practice as a guide to the different phases of my RHD journey. The different phases of my RHD journey include: the initial phase of the RHD journey; the theory phase; confirmation; the relational phase; the implementation of the research project; and the drafting of the dissertation. The themes extracted from the data are outlined in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of RHD journey</th>
<th>Themes extracted from data</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial stage of RHD journey - Developing ideas for topic</td>
<td>Originality, Courage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theory phase - Designing the research proposal</td>
<td>Power of thought, Designing and achieving goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>Empowering, Dimensions of journey: emotional, spiritual and relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational phase – Relationships with supervisor and other RHD student relationship</td>
<td>Relationships – no person’s an island, Isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of the research project - Method, data analysis</td>
<td>Persistence, Time pressures – student and supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal phase - Drafting of dissertation</td>
<td>Feeling invisible, Identity</td>
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A starting point for anyone’s journey in life is often a desire or motivation to attain a goal, hence the same can be said for the desire to commence the RHD journey. The goal for some might be the pursuit of financial freedom, a childhood dream, or acceptance into the academic community. Tracy (2003) highlights that goals instil in individuals a sense of meaning, purpose and direction, and that goals may be positioned for one’s pursuit of academic, sporting, financial or social excellence. Nevertheless, as with life journeys that start off with well planned goals, my RHD journey has encountered and been confronted with tensions, ambiguities and potentialities.

In the initial stage of my RHD journey there was a definite sense of excitement. That sense of excitement ranged from curiosity to inspiration to passion. During the initial phase the main objective was to develop ideas for my research, what was it that I wanted to research and how was I going to frame it? As I entered into this phase of my journey I experienced excitement about the infinite possibilities. The main themes that appeared from the data during this phase were originality and courage. Courage is defined in its academic sense referring to the capacity to frame, re-frame and, where necessary discard ideas based on empirical evidence (Lampert, 1990). Traditionally undertaking an RHD journey requires the researcher to produce work that is original. The term original does not in a sense mean the work has to be something the world has never seen before, it does however indicate the work has to be an original contribution to knowledge and understanding in the chosen field (Winter, Griffiths et al., 2000). The quest for originality and the refinement of my topic during the first phase of my RHD journey was certainly one which unearthed tensions.

Whilst embarking on my RHD journey and refining my topic in the pursuit to achieve originality I experienced fear. Fear in the sense of inadequacy rather than in concern for well-being (Kahneman, Diener et al., 2003). These feelings of being afraid and even overwhelmed often led to doubt around the decision to embark on an RHD journey. This led me to question whether I have both the ability and the necessary determination required to charter and navigate my way through this RHD journey and reach my final destination. In order to overcome the feelings experienced during this internal struggle I had to find courage to move forward.

Although during the initial phase of the RHD journey my sense of self-efficacy fluctuated, and courage was required in order to progress into the next phase, the experience was largely one that I would look back on with fond memories. As I entered into the theory phase (see Table 2) it was clear that smaller short term goals were required in order to achieve the ultimate goal. To ensure the determination and drive to continue remained, it wasn’t enough to just revisit the goals set at the commencement of the journey. When faced with major challenges it was imperative to not just look at the journey as a whole as this proved at times to be overwhelming. Designing smaller achievable goals which would ultimately lead toward completion, provided me with a sense of meaning, purpose and direction (Tracy, 2003).
It is apparent in the literature (Bandura, 1977) that a student’s high self-efficacy beliefs have a powerful effect on cognitive processes where behaviour, being purposive, is regulated by personal thoughts exemplifying valued goals. The more evident the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenged that a student is likely to set and the firmer the commitment to achieving set goals despite such doubt. The second theme exposed from the data analysis during this phase of the RHD journey was power of thought. During times of challenge and self doubt, it was necessary to engage in reflective practice (Bandura, 1994) and draw from inner strengths to work through negative feelings. According to Deci and Ryan (1985) inner strengths and power of thought are both outcomes of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from the pleasure experienced from the mastery of a task or the sense of satisfaction in working on or completing a task. Such an outlook advances intrinsic interest and engrossment in a task even when faced with adversities. During these times of my RHD journey it was important to reflect on the writings of motivational theorists (Kahlefeldt, 2004) that highlight that we become what we think. The belief is if we think failure, we fail; if we fear we will destroy our confidence in ourselves; but if we contemplate success, we succeed (Kahlefeldt, 2004).

As I journeyed into the confirmation phase (Table 2), power of thought underpinned my cognitive processes. However, the ability to work through the adversities that I was faced with during this time did not simply lie with the power of my thought processes. Through reflection on this time and conducting analysis on the data during this phase it was clear there were other dimensions that assisted me through this part of the journey. Such dimensions include emotional, spiritual and relational aspects. Emotional agency relates to using emotions in order to achieve an aim (Kószegi, 2006). Spiritual agency relates to using the resources of a belief system to enact a goal (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000). Relational agency relates to using networks of relations to achieve a goal (Edwards, 2005).

In essence, drawing from all of these dimensions enabled me to meet the requirements of this challenging time. The ability to leap over the tensions does not lie only in beliefs in personal capabilities or even in the strength and courage to persist, but also in staying in touch with emotions, sourcing profound spiritual strengths, and drawing on the support from those around me. When the beliefs in my own ability and my perseverance faded, the only viable assets remaining were my emotions, my spiritual strength and my support network.

RHD journeys are fraught with tensions and ambiguities and as a student I had to learn how to deal with these effectively. One must be determined to overcome the difficulties faced and make virtue of them in order to reach a final destination. During the confirmation phase of my RHD journey overcoming such difficulties required a humbled nature to accept the slow nature of growing, which in turn brought about a real understanding. Humility here is used in the academic sense which requires the recognition of the inadequacy of ideas when necessary (Lampert, 1990). In the confirmation phase, a sense of empowerment was experienced and identified as one of the
major themes extracted from the data. Specifically, this empowerment peaked at the acceptance of my confirmation paper. A great sense of achievement was experienced as I was on my way to achieving my ultimate goal and my hard work was starting to pay off. I had been accepted by the examiners which signified to me that I was half way to being accepted into the academic community.

As I entered into the next phase of my journey and the relief of overcoming my confirmation faded, I experienced a period of isolation. While experiencing this isolation, uncertainties appeared. Did I have the ability to complete this journey, was it worth the effort? I felt like an alone individual working on the limits trying to uncover knowledge. Whilst experiencing these feelings it was a time of unrest, however upon reflection I now view those feelings differently. Instead of perceiving them as negative, I believe it is more appropriate to label them as ambiguities. On one hand it was the pessimism of going it alone, and on the other hand it was the feeling that I had come this far, I just needed support. It was during that time I recognised the importance of networking and meeting other people working in a similar area. Tapping into networks such as a community of scholarly practice provided me with the encouragement when things became rough. That encouragement from others improved my outlook and propagated positive thinking. The data analysis of this phase of my RHD journey emphasised the importance of relationships and in turn made me recognise the prevalence of the phase - no person’s an island.

As the journey progressed and goals were slowly being checked off, it is was easy to become complacent and to be deceived into thinking that all was well. Once I had completed my confirmation and I entered into the data analysis phase of the RHD journey, further tensions were experienced. Following on from the urgency of meeting the deadlines of the confirmation, I experienced a more relaxed attitude where goals retreated into the background. During this time it became clear that I needed to remain focussed on goals and implement a timeline alongside those goals to ensure I didn’t loose track of time. Meeting the requirements of a busy lifestyle and work commitments as well as being immersed within the RHD journey I found it difficult to achieve a balance. One of the major obstacles faced during this phase of my RHD journey was overcoming time pressures.

When you set out on a journey, the expectation is that you will make steady progress and edge closer toward the ultimate goal (Senn, 2002). When undertaking the RHD journey there are two options to choose: to either circum to the tensions faced and give up, or persist. The definition of persistence (Pavlina, 2005) is the ability to maintain action despite the emotions experienced. In a research environment in which students are required to be productive, the experience of feeling stuck and unable to move can lead to feelings of anxiety. It’s persistence that enabled me to keep moving forward in the journey despite the lack of motivation and anxieties experienced.

Such persistence enabled me to move into the latest phase of my RHD journey, the drafting of the dissertation. During the transition from university
graduate to RHD student, I was struck by the sense of being temporary that surrounded me and continues to surround me and my identity as a researcher. This transition during the course of what was in many ways one continuous journey, highlighted my status and identity as a researcher as something problematic and to be negotiated, rather than fixed and dependable.

Another emotional aspect of the RHD journey, categorised as a tension, was the feeling of invisibility experienced during the latest phase of the journey, the drafting of the dissertation. This feeling of invisibility is closely linked to the previously discussed development of a sense of identity. Given the tensions, ambiguities and potentialities, and the years involved in the RHD journey, a feeling of ambivalence arose around the journey to me being accepted and taken seriously as a researcher. Hence the feeling of invisibility was experienced as there often seemed to be a gap between those who had already obtained their research higher degree and had been accept by fellow academics, and those navigating their way through unknown waters. This acceptance is one which isn’t easily achieved by the novice researcher and often led to experiencing mixed emotions about the RHD process.

Concluding Comments

Feelings surrounding the experiences of the nature of the RHD journey tend to fall into three categories: tensions, ambiguities and potentialities. The visions offered by such experiences can be identified as intertwined and interconnected negative, positive and mixed. These experiences tend to have decisive phases starting with those that are positive such as the feeling of empowerment and designing and achieving of various goals, followed by subsequent feelings of invisibility and isolation. Despite experiencing these up’s and down’s, the drive to achieve academic excellence offers a romantic notion of the researcher as a lone individual working at the frontiers uncovering knowledge. Although the themes unearthed from my RHD journey are valid and certainly have their value, in isolation they provide an inadequate explanation of the significance of the research journey and how they shaped me into the researcher that I have become.

References


