the leisure review
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Reflective practice: The Leisure Review round table

Reflective practice is a long-established learning method prevalent in diverse professions and business circles but what role does it play, if any, in sports coaching within the UK? The Leisure Review brought three coaching experts together to discuss the issue from the differing perspectives of sport and business.

One of the problems with the speed of modern life, apart from the proliferation of pointless e-communication and the erosion of the art of conversation, is the lack of time and space to think, to reflect. Without reflection there can be no learning so what part does reflective practice have in the world of sports coaching? We were honoured to have lunch with Amy Taylor of British Cycling, James Finn of business psychology consultancy Crelos and a man fast becoming a staple in the pages of The Leisure Review, Hamish Telfer.

Having met the restaurant critic of a Sunday broadsheet on the train from Euston and been thus assured of the quality of our chosen restaurant – Michael Caines at the Abode – the editor kicked off the discussion.


Reflective practitioners: Amy Taylor, Hamish Telfer and James Finn

TLR: Reflective practice is an accepted aspect of coaching in business and organisational circles – nursing and medicine offer two obvious examples – but it seems that this approach is less prevalent in sport, an area of activity generally regarded to be at the cutting edge of coaching development. As a proponent of reflective practice in sport, Hamish, what do you understand by the term?

Hamish Telfer (HT): I can tell you why I use it better than give an off-the-cuff definition. I use it for the same reasons as my colleagues here. It's simply a process or a means of self-examination in relation to the skills and the process of practice, which includes the individual. So it is not just what you do, it is also how you do it and your role, place and function within that. For me it's a self-empowering tool, or can be, but from my experience of using it there are undoubtedly issues about how it's used and the effectiveness of individuals able to use it. There are many people who are not yet emotionally aware enough to be able to use it. If you asked me could I have been a good reflective practitioner – and I'm not saying that I am a good one now – as a young national coach at the age of 25, I would say, "No, I'd have been crap at it." I think there's a life process you have to go through and an awareness that you have to gain that I think young people, thankfully in some senses, are blissfully unaware of. One of the things reflection can do is to make you cautious and I am not risk-averse. I'm risk-positive; I love risk.

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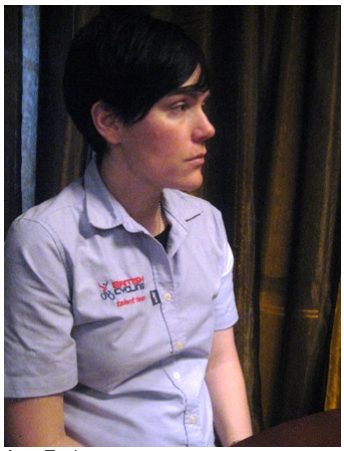
Does that sound familiar to you, Amy and James, in your respective environments? Does that sound like a process you have used, whether consciously or unconsciously?


Amy Taylor

Amy Taylor (AT): Absolutely. From my experience in coaching and science, and business as well, it is interesting what you say about a 25-year-old coach. In New Zealand we don't use reflective practice. It's supervisionist really. There is mentoring, for example, and there are various things that come underneath it, such as feedback, as part of reflective practice. So we look at all those components but they come from various angles as opposed to being under the umbrella of reflective practice. From my own experience, your comment about life experience reflects exactly what happened to me. I first started coaching at 19 but being a scientist it was all about heart-rate files and the training programme. It wasn't about me as a coach. In my early twenties I realised that there was something missing and that process started kicking in and I had to start reflective practice.

Is it a mechanism for the performer, whether in a sporting or business environment, or is it about the coach?

James Finn (JF): One theory of learning which I love is Eriksson's life stages, which says that as a kid you're out there to explore then certain things happen at key stages of your life. In your twenties you get your first job then you probably get married or buy a house. You have to make life decisions and that's when you realise whether you are risk-averse. In your thirties you consolidate, late thirties you have your mid-life crisis, so there's a pattern to life and the theory is that by 40 years old those life stages are much more predictable. I grew up in an area where my friends said they

were the first people in their family not to go down the black hole [coal mine] and the only option was to get some A levels and work in a bank. It was an area and a time where you married the girl next door. Now as a society we are much more individualistic but we're more isolated. I talk to board members and they feel as though they are on their own. There are people who have made a lot of money and this is the first recession they've ever been through so how do they actually understand how they got it wrong? I came to reflective practice through consulting and Peter Senge's five disciplines. One of the five disciplines is the need to understand what just happened in the company you just consulted with so you can learn and make changes next time. I think the world is changing, you are more isolated but you are more empowered to make key decisions. Kids now can be anything but when I was a kid you were line-managed and you didn't need to reflect. You didn't really need to think. Because there is so much choice now you do need to reflect and that requires emotional maturity. You need to make mistakes.


James Finn

AT: It takes a lot of strength and maturity to admit that you got something wrong, especially when you're a teenager.

HT: I think some can do it. I did a study with a group of 35 students doing a practitioner skills module. The task was, can you coach and if you can't you've failed. It was interesting that once most them had grasped the mechanics of [coaching] – and that's a critical issue – there were no fails. That was quite unusual because I'm well known to be quite vigorous in weeding people out. What was interesting was that once they had grasped the structure even the weaker students were able to slot themselves in. We did have students at the age of 20 and some more mature students and it was interesting that the better what I might call their emotional connection with themselves not only did they do the mechanics but they were able to bore right down into themselves, interrogating their motives and their emotions. They were very good at it. I was not assessing the quality of that but rather their ability to do it. That becomes really important because I think there is a big ethical issue about reflective practice. In your line of work, James, sometimes you will hear somebody say something which is pejorative or wrong but their thoughts are their thoughts. You may challenge them and that immediately closes them down: "Am I going to reveal myself to this guy as a complete arse?" The answer is: "Unlikely."


Hamish Telfer

At this point in the discussion the first course arrived and attention turned platewards until Dr Telfer picked up the suggestion that reflective practice is used more in organisational contexts than in sports coaching .

HT: It has been mainly used in the professions, mainly the caring professions, although not always; usually providing a public service, although not always, to operate as a self-auditing tool: "In making that decision how did I come to make it?"

Do you have any examples of it being used in coaching?

HT: Pamela Richards is the Welsh national team coach for hockey and she uses reflective practice with players. It was Pam and I who started that process. She was curious with the Welsh under-21s about five years ago when they made the European finals. Pam is into empowering teams and she has won European gold at under-16, under-18 and under-21. She is very competent and gifted. She's young and talented. Pam asked me to work with the under-21s as she uses reflective practice herself but was curious to see if it could help the team function better as a team and improve the quality of decision-making on the pitch. They would be held accountable, by themselves first of all, then by their colleagues and thirdly by the coach. I thought it was quite spectacular. I was there to see the end results, at the championships, and it was terrific to watch. The players made a lot of the decisions themselves. There was a degree of structure, as you would expect, but Pam said, "If these players believe that this is the way they should play as long as I don't fundamentally disagree with that then that is how they'll play."

JF: These are transitional teams though and at some point the people move on from the squad. In other teams a couple of people might move on, which makes it a leadership issue.

HT: And that's the problem. As those players moved through to the senior squad it was a totally different approach and the drop-out rate was quite high.

Dave Brailsford says in interviews that the coaching team at British Cycling is there for the athlete. It's a simple statement but, in the context of the blanket media coverage of football, it's also a huge statement. It immediately puts pressure on the athlete. Is there a downside to that?

AT: The downside can be if you are putting on pressure – accountability, responsibility and empowerment – then the leadership balance can go off; the athlete can be too much in charge. Although overall it's a great approach.

HT: Watching Pam deal with that balance was interesting. The first thing that was agreed was: why are we all here? The answer was, we're here to win gold. Within that there are certain limitations on each of us: we have to listen to each other, there are inherent power structures and I have been put in place to guide you appropriately so I may have to tell you to do or not do this or that. Within that I want to hear what you think and what you say.

JF: In terms of technique there are absolutes. One way is better than another, isn't it?

AT: But reflective practice allows the players to discover that for themselves.

HT: That's right.

JF: But you still have an agenda. For example, it's funny how I always choose to do what my girlfriend wants me to do. People are resourceful and they will come up with things but how do you avoid steering them if you know of a solution to a problem? You can't completely empower them if you have an agenda. A team of individuals will have a common goal: gold.

HT: But isn't that life anyway? Otherwise one becomes entirely hedonistic. There are always certain structures and limitations. At a simplistic level I have to be on a 6.15pm train today because I have something to do. Where would I rather be? I might suggest to my colleagues I'd rather be with you. There are some fields of life when one can be quite hedonistic and sports people tend towards that side. Some people call it 'driven' but even within the drive there is still a constraint because there is a target, a goal they want to meet. Sometimes it's trying to find the balance between how you say that the drive they have for a particular goal is unrealistic and how your view of that goal helps them or constrains them. Mind you, sometimes those who think they have a view or an authority get it wrong. I've got it wrong as a coach.

AT: And that's where the outcome versus the actual process of reflection becomes really important, especially when it comes to that old saying, the goal is the path and the path is the goal. You've got to have a path to get there.

HT: I think what Pam tries to do is to say that the process of reflection is only one of a number of paths but it is a path that we can commonly agree is important for us all to be at the same place on. If we can do that then all of us are doing something similar. It may not be the same way or time but it is similar. Is this new in sport? Absolutely not. David Whittaker did this in the 1984 Olympic Games. What he did with the hockey squad at the time was completely revolutionary. They thought he was barking mad: "You're going to make me think? Just tell me what to do." There is an issue in sport that reflective practice is still relatively new.

But surely British Cycling is doing it? And Chris Hughton at Newcastle United is perhaps the most high-profile example. He was getting pilloried when he was newly in post because he was said to have put the senior players in charge of the team. It sounded like reflective practice.

HT: I'm sorry to jump in but I have a real problem with football. What we see at the league end may not reflect what happens within other branches of the sport since at the league end there is a big difference to how they see what coaching is, often seeing coaching and managing as the same perhaps. There are gaps in the quality of provision and at some levels the FA are now making inroads but generally I believe they are held back by images of coaching within the professional league structure which in my view are not as 'with it' as in some other sports such as cycling, rowing and some other field games. I think this is where some sports offer helpful examples and others where there is robust good practice don't get the credit for what they are doing. Getting footballers to think about what they are doing and take some responsibility for what they are doing is new for football. They don't take to reflective practice kindly. I know of no reflective practice going on in football so Chris Hughton is news to me.

JF: I think Roy Hodgson does it a bit but there are differences between the sports. In cycling you've got goals over a certain period of time. With football the classic situation, and this ties into management theory, is that you're three-nil down at half-time and you've only got 45 minutes to turn it round. Now you can be gentle and encourage players to think about a few things or you can tell people in no uncertain terms to win their battles. The feedback is immediate: you've got your fans shouting at you. In the longer term you've probably got time to reflect on how to improve performance but in football because of the nature of the game itself and the contracts [that managers work to], things are so short-term that someone needs to say, "This is how it is. I'll do the reflection."

HT: Pam would certainly recognise that on a game-by-game basis but she would say that they tend not to use it within the game but they certainly use it between games. In the Europeans they were playing every day, which is how it is in hockey. I think you're right: there are fault lines in reflective practice.

JF: In sport you can conceptually learn something. Rationally, I may need to start using my left as well as my right if I want to be a rounded player but when it comes to the game I'm going to default to my natural foot. You have to practise and that's where the reflective practitioner works on the emotional side by creating opportunities in a safer environment to develop. I'm not sure that football facilitates that. They just pay people to use their right foot.

AT: In New Zealand I've seen that. An Irish guy took over the football team – can't remember his name – and he was told he had a year in post to get qualification for a championship. The first thing he did was buy time, saying it's going to be a long-term approach. He started reflective practice straight away and slowly they began to go up and up. Their progress has been amazing.

JF: Reflection means that you may have made mistakes so it's about having the safety net and recognising that you need to have a go at it. If it becomes too rational, if we're going to expect kids to identify their careers at an early age and then just follow it through, there is going to be an awful lot of pressure on them.

HT: You've both put a finger a key issue by talking about rationality and confidence. I think there's also something about levels of self-efficacy which is helpful. In my experience the higher the levels of self-efficacy in individuals the more risk-positive they are. So they will, to take James's analogy, use their left foot as opposed to their right. They will make stronger and make better attempts. And Pam would say, "That's my job as coach to spot that and support the individuals whose levels of self-efficacy are relatively low and actually draw back those who are heading to the brink like a lemming, those whose levels of self-efficacy are high but almost irrationally so."

JF: People will have preferences for risk-taking. Some people will react instantly to a challenge, while others will say, "I'm not sure." And sometimes the people who react instantly will go off in the wrong direction.

HT: It is about tasking people to do the right thing as well. In certain circumstances you might want the guy who says 'Go!' but in other circumstances you might want to take a pause to think. It's about getting people to understand those complexities in different situations. This is where I think you come back to what reflective practice is about because it is also termed reflective learning. Tony Ghaye [Director of Reflective Learning UK] is now trying turn a lot of the terminology to reflect this use as learning, both positive and negative. Pam emphasises that it is not just about reflecting on things you've cocked up. She also wants people to reflect on what you did well as much as possible because very often you don't know why it works; it just did.

AT: That's a big part of confidence: acknowledging your strengths.

Bringing in TLR's own coaching correspondent Mick Owen, Mick, from your perspective, how applicable is this to the coaches that you are tutoring? Is this completely alien to them and suitable only for the elite or could it be applied to coaches at levels one and two?

MO: I think it goes to the conversation that Hamish and I have had [in the pages of TLR] about people defaulting to the model that they have always seen. If we don't change the culture of British coaching and British sport there's no point in bothering with reflective practice. At elite level we can change the culture because it's a small number of people who are always looking to change but for the vast mass of people doing an hour on a Sunday morning or two hours on a Wednesday evening I think that we ought to try. One of the questions that I wanted to ask was how soon are we going to get to that stage through the UK coaching framework. Does UK coaching care about this? I think it does because they would argue they are moving to 'asking not telling', which is the first step, isn't it?

AT: Absolutely. It's a message in all British Cycling coaching.

MO: In British Cycling, where you've got an object lesson in how to do it properly, they ask rather than tell. In English rugby, what does Martin Johnson do? He tells.

JF: Is that the differentiator of success or are the two happening at the same time?

HT: I think sport is very unsophisticated in how it views itself so I tend to agree with Mick here. The number of times I do coaching courses and they talk about what Sir Alex Ferguson does but you don't know what he does or not; it's what the press tells you he does. Let's cut to the chase and start using evidence-based practice more. I don't know what Ferguson does or doesn't do. With Johnson we know a bit more about his methods because you can go and see him working. Mick is right: he is much more didactic. It's worth remembering that he will be successful with teams who have a preference for that modus of operation. I think there's an issue to do with reflection, which often why it is misunderstood. I remember the first time I came across it with Andy Borrie [now director of sport performance at Loughborough University] and I remember looking at Andy thinking this is sorcery but the way he introduced the concept was actually quite fundamental. So when you talk about how people reflect rather than what it is I think you have some very powerful tools for unlocking this in people's minds. For example, one girl provided me with a final assessment and a reflective record written up with mind maps, routes and pathways; another one wrote it like an essay; somebody did it in bullet points; and one gave me an audio diary. I'm now thinking, that's how it should be done. How does the learner want to learn? Do they know? In James's area of business I would imagine that you get the situation in which the coach – the company director – wants to work one way and the performer – or the worker – who wants to work slightly differently. They both understand the goal and they will both get there but using different methods. Very often that's where the tension arises and inappropriate power is exercised by the coach saying, "You'll do it this way."

AT: And that's where personality and style comes into play.

JF: If you took all the funding away from British Cycling would they continue the same approach? With Sir Alex Ferguson we see him week in, week out on the sidelines, shouting and berating. That is how he does it and he has been successful. HT: Maybe

he lets us see how he operates with officials but I'm interested in how he works with the players. In operating with the officials like that, is that a game? I know that within sport there are games within games.

MO: But Ferguson has had a succession of head coaches working under him. I don't think Ferguson is a coach. Reading the biographies, I think he's something else.

At this point the discussion left reflective practice per se and explored other aspects of coaching dark arts until TLR noticed that the coffee had arrived and the clock was running down.

We're going to reluctantly bring this to a close. Is there a future for reflective practice in the generality of coaching?

HT: I think sport has embraced reflective practice. I think earlier comments have indicated the tensions that still exist in some sports and at some levels of sport but we need more Whittakers, more coaches who are more visible in their use of it and that will sell the message. I think James and Amy made the point earlier on that when people are sold this technique as something that will help them the moment they realise that they have been give the tools to do it – and we often sell the idea but don't give them the right tool to get at it – then when a light goes on above their head they will start to use it.

AT: Especially when they are given something that has so much value.

JF: It could be a difficult sell: "A light bulb came on and suddenly I realised I was the problem." For most people it is incremental, bits and pieces fit in as you gradually make sense of it. As your life changes, as you change, as your body changes the issues are different and it is so important now that we are more individualistic and we have so many goals. You do come to lots of crossroads and you just have to realise that you are at your next crossroads and that doesn't have to beat you up.

At this point, we turned the tape off and, of course, the conversation then got far more interesting, although a little less directly related to coaching and reflective practice. However, both the on-the-record conversation and the subsequent off-the-record conversation suggested that further exploration of the relationship between business and sports coaching is worthy of consideration. The Leisure Review will do its best to bring this debate to light in subsequent forums.

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