

# Lessons Learned: Coaches' Perceptions of a Pilot E-Mentoring Programme

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The purpose of this study was to examine mentor and mentee perceptions of the viability of a pilot e-mentoring programme for U.S. lacrosse (USL) coaches. Twelve mentees and 12 mentors were paired into dyads, met at a national coaching convention, and were directed to continue their mentoring relationship for up to 6 months via an online platform. Semistructured postprogramme interviews were conducted with four mentors and six mentees at the conclusion of the mentoring relationships. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed via thematic analysis. Results showed that mentors and mentees experienced many of the benefits, barriers, and advantages found in traditional mentoring and e-mentoring relationships. Of interest were three key findings in which trust and respect was quickly experienced by participants, equity within the relationship created collegiality, and technology barriers limited effective teaching methods. Based on the results, practical implications for e-mentoring programmes are presented.

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A large amount of coaching science research is dedicated to understanding how coaches learn to coach (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). According to Nelson, Cushion, and Potrac (2006), coaches learn in three different situations: (a) formal learning (i.e., large-scale curriculum-based education), (b) nonformal learning (i.e., coaching workshops and conferences), and (c) informal learning (i.e., intentional or incidental day-to-day learning experiences). There is a wealth of evidence suggesting that coaches primarily learn via informal learning opportunities, such as athletic and coaching experiences, self-reflection, interactions with peer coaches, communities of practice, and mentoring (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; He, Trudel, & Culver, 2018). In particular, *mentoring* is defined by the pillars of trust and respect (Bloom, 2013), and is often cited as an effective means of acquiring knowledge and facilitating the career development of sport coaches across both disability (Fairhurst, Bloom, & Harvey, 2017; Taylor, Werthner, & Culver, 2014) and able-bodied sport contexts (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008; Vallee, & Bloom, 2016).

Outside of the sport context, Kram's (1985) mentor role theory asserts that mentors provide a range of roles and responsibilities that contribute to a mentee's career advancement (i.e., career development functions) and their personal growth (i.e., psychosocial functions). This theory postulates that mentors can provide a range of five career development functions, where mentors might (a) sponsor promotions, (b) coach the mentee, (c) protect the mentee from adversity, (d) provide challenging assignments, and (e) facilitate increased exposure for their mentee. Mentors also provide a range of four psychosocial functions, where the mentor might help the mentee develop a professional identity, act as a sounding board for the

mentee, be respectful and supportive, and act as a role model. Moreover, mentoring can be either formal or informal, and is primarily distinguished based on the structure and initiation of the relationship (Kram, 1983; Tourigny & Pulich, 2005). *Informal mentoring* refers to a mentor-mentee relationship that emerges organically, and is known to last anywhere between 3–6 years. Conversely, *formal mentoring* is developed with the assistance of a third party who is responsible for matching the mentor and the mentee, and the contractual relationship typically lasts between 6 months and 1 year (Kram, 1983; Tourigny & Pulich, 2005).

There is a growing body of research supporting the value of mentoring across varying coaching contexts (Bloom, Lefebvre, & Smith, 2018; Donoso-Morales, Bloom, & Caron, 2017; Koh, Bloom, Fairhurst, Paiement, & Kee, 2014; Vallée & Bloom, 2016), with the majority of this research describing the benefits of mentoring that has emerged organically. For instance, Donoso-Morales and colleagues (2017) interviewed six serial-winning Canadian university coaches with more than 30 combined national titles. Among their findings, the coaches felt that seeking mentors was a crucial element to creating and sustaining a culture of excellence. This was in large part because their mentors helped them acquire skills that went beyond technical and tactical knowledge, including less tangible skills such as interpersonal knowledge, or coping with the emotional aspects of the game. Similarly, Vallée and Bloom (2016) discussed the insights of a five-time Canadian university national championship winning coach and found that lifelong learning and personal reflection that often occurred with the help of a mentor coach were key elements to her coaching success. In one of the earliest and most direct empirical investigations of mentoring in sport coaching, Bloom and colleagues (1998) found that mentoring was a long-term process that began when coaches were athletes and continued throughout their entire coaching careers, including when they began acting as mentors to athletes and other young coaches. Many of the coaches stated that their mentors taught them technical, tactical, and physical skills and also shared their philosophies,

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beliefs, and values about coaching. As a result, trusting relationships were developed with their mentors who provided them with opportunities to access valuable information and create a network of colleagues.

Although there is strong support for the effectiveness of informally-structured mentoring, not all coaches are afforded the opportunity to engage in such a partnership (Bloom et al., 1998). In fact, despite efforts to create guidelines to facilitate the process of identifying, initiating, and developing a mentoring partnership (Grant, Dorgo, & Griffin, 2014), there is currently no set path to acquiring an informal mentor (Bloom, 2013; Bloom et al., 1998). This may partly be the reason that researchers have been calling for the development and implementation of formalised mentoring programmes (e.g., Bloom, 2013; Jones, Harris, & Miles, 2009).

Recently, researchers in both the United Kingdom (Sawiuk, Taylor, & Groom, 2016a, 2016b) and Singapore (Koh et al., 2014) have begun investigating formalised coach mentoring programmes. For example, Koh et al. (2014) developed and implemented a formalised mentoring programme for novice basketball coaches embedded within a coach education course in Singapore. Through focus group interviews with both mentors and mentees, their findings indicated that the mentoring programme yielded many benefits for both parties. Mentors reported improving their interpersonal/communication skills and engaged in meaningful self-reflection. The mentees reported being exposed to new coaching tools and ideas while increasing their competence and self-confidence toward their coaching knowledge, methods, and experiences. Importantly, these benefits echo those reported by researchers in other comparable fields (e.g., Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Godshalk & Sosik, 2003).

Although there is value in adopting a formalised approach to coach mentoring, there are also barriers that can jeopardise the effectiveness of formally-structured mentoring programmes. According to Bloom (2013), the lack of professionalization of coaching can make it difficult to find and hire coaches willing to serve as mentors. Other barriers such as mismatches between mentors and mentees, scheduling conflicts, difficulties with navigating micro-political agendas, and geographical distance can also impede the effectiveness of formal programmes (Bloom, 2013; Koh et al., 2014; Sawiuk et al., 2016a, 2016b). Koh et al. (2014) provided recommendations for overcoming some of these barriers, including being mindful of how mentors and mentees are matched, lengthening the duration of the mentoring programme, and involving the mentors in the development of the programme. Another possible solution that has been increasingly adopted across other disciplines is *e-mentoring* (e.g., Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003; Single & Single, 2005; Williams & Kim, 2011).

Analogous to Bloom's (2013) definition of coach mentoring, Ensher and Murphy (2008) define e-mentoring as "a mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a mentee, which provides new learning as well as career and emotional support, primarily through e-mail and other electronic means (e.g., instant messaging, chat rooms, social network spaces, etc.)" (p. 300). E-mentoring can be particularly advantageous in that it can (a) facilitate access to mentors, (b) transcend geographical barriers, (c) occur at any time and/or any place, (d) help overcome personality barriers (e.g., poor social skills), and (e) record interactions (Ensher & Murphy, 2008; Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Single & Single, 2005). Moreover, McQuade, Davis, and Nash (2015) suggested that promoting e-mentoring could enable access to more mentor coaches, recruitment of more coaches from different locales, and reduce the cost of the services.

Despite the positive reviews of e-mentoring in nonsport, it has yet to be introduced in formalised mentoring programmes for sport coaches, which themselves remain scarce. In fact, Ragins and Kram (2007) further address the scarcity of mentoring by saying that "scholars continue to struggle with understanding the complexity of this life-altering relationship. In a nutshell, we know it works; we are grappling with why, when, and how" (p. 4). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine mentor and mentee perceptions of the viability of a pilot e-mentoring programme for U.S. lacrosse (USL) coaches. Specifically, researchers explored whether e-mentoring could be an alternative for traditional, face-to-face mentoring by identifying the benefits and barriers, and other considerations that could be implemented in future iterations of the e-mentoring programme. Moreover, the study was guided by the following questions: How did the e-mentoring programme functionally work (i.e., matching mentor/mentee dyads, communication between participations, structure of the relationship, and content discussed)? What were the experiences of participants in the mentoring relationship? What changes could improve the programme in the future? These questions were posed in order to better understand the programme in its initial form, assess its effectiveness, and prepare for future iterations in order to improve the mentoring within USL.

## Methods

The researchers' presuppositions of epistemological constructivism and ontological relativism informed the design of the e-mentoring programme, data collection, data analysis, and quality judgement. More directly, the e-mentoring programme allowed mentors and mentees to meet face-to-face via electronic devices in order to create knowledge through interactions that investigated their understanding of coaching realities arising from their experiences in lacrosse. Also, data collection occurred via a semistructured interview protocol that allowed the interactions between the interviewer and interviewee to create knowledge through a conversational, interactive approach to interviews, and opportunities to delve deeper into the meaning and multiple realities represented within their experiences. Finally, researchers employed a relativistic "letting go" perspective in selecting a list of criteria—sincerity, critical friend, and meaningful coherence—that allows the reader to judge the quality of the study by building their own understanding of reality based on the methods used within a specific context and the alignment of the results with those data (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The remainder of this section provides the pertinent information on the programme, participants, data collection, data analysis, and quality of the study from these perspectives.

### E-mentoring Programme Design

Researchers and representatives from USL initially met to discuss and plan a mentoring programme. The focus of this design was to create an e-mentoring programme that could align with the values and content of USL. Once the study was designed, USL sent e-mails to coaches and trainers who were participants in a USL coach education programme (CEP). Participants who indicated interest in the programme and who were planning to attend the national coaching convention were asked to provide the following information: their years of coaching experience, CEP training experience or level of certification, topics of coaching interest, area(s) of specialization, and available dates for their initial meeting at the national coaching convention. After these data were

collected, USL disseminated the mentee information to the mentors and mentor information to the mentees without person indicators. Participants used the demographic information to rank order the mentees or mentors from most to least desired for the mentoring relationship. Representatives from USL gathered the participants' ranking preferences and formed the dyads for this programme based on this information.

After the participants were paired, the dyads were asked to engage in a 30-min face-to-face meeting at the USL national coaching convention. The pairings were directed to continue their relationship via an online communication platform. USL covered the cost of using this online platform, and compensated the mentors with a stipend. Mentors and mentees were expected to participate in the mentoring relationship for an entire 6-month season immediately following the national coaching convention. However, because the structure of the programme allowed participants to shape the frequency and duration of their interactions, there was potential for the relationship to end early or to continue past the requested 6-month duration.

## Participants

As stated above, USL helped recruit mentees (CEP lower-level certification coaches) and mentors (CEP trainers) for this study. A total of 12 novice mentees and 12 mentors accepted the invitation to participate in the e-mentoring programme and provided consent via online Valdosta State University institutional review board documents. The majority of the mentees earned a level one or two CEP certification, had coached less than 7 years, and coached either U13 or U15 athletes. All the mentors had coached for more than 10 years, had at least 5 years of training experience with USL, and were certified to teach all levels of the CEP programme in either the men's or women's game. Over a 2-month time period, six mentees and four mentors took part in postprogramme interviews, which represented 9 of the 12 dyads who participated in the programme.

## Data Collection: Postprogramme Interviews

At the end of the requested 6-month duration of the mentoring programme, USL helped conscript mentors and mentees to complete semistructured, digitally-recorded interviews with the research team. The interview guide was divided into five sections. First, participants were asked to recount their athletic/coaching career in order to initiate discussion, gain context, and build trust and rapport. Second, participants were questioned about their experiences in the e-mentoring programme that included reasons for joining the programme, their initial meeting at the national coaching convention, communications with their counterpart, and termination of the relationship. In the third section, the interview guide addressed ways the mentor completed his/her roles, respectively. This section allowed the participants to think more deeply about the nature of the mentoring relationship prior to asking about their specific perceptions of the e-mentoring programme. The fourth section focused on the manner in which the programme operated, such as who initiated contact, controlled the conversations, and introduced topics. This section also included the topics discussed, the types of interactions, and if the programme helped the mentee. This allowed participants an opportunity for greater descriptions of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the content, delivery, and outcomes of the programme. In the final section, researchers asked what suggestions the participant would make in order to help create a more effective programme.

## Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis took place in the current study (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2017). The phases of analysis followed current conventions of immersion and familiarization, code generation, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming themes (Braun et al., 2017). Preliminary analysis began with researchers independently examining data starting with the individual mentee interviews followed by the individual mentor interviews. Researchers then met on three occasions to present, debate, and review their findings and perspectives. During each meeting, researchers took meeting notes about the information discussed, agreement/disagreements, and tasks for future meetings. These meeting notes helped focus the data analysis and summate the results for the analysis. Comparing the researchers' perspectives allowed for rich rigor and more accurate, deep analysis. Discussions from these meetings guided the final analysis resulting in identification of two overarching themes, each containing two themes.

## Judging Quality

Within this study, researchers used the "letting go" perspective to guide the criteria for judging quality (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This relativistic approach rejects the notion of validity from an objectivist or positivist point of view in which criteria are normative, fixed, and rigid for all inquiries. Accordingly, the following characteristics were used to guide the reader to make their own judgement about the quality of this study: sincerity and meaningful coherence (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

First, sincerity or self-reflexivity upon the researchers' bias was shown through the constant comparison of researchers' perspectives throughout the data analysis process. Between meetings, two of the researchers tasked with data analysis would individually return to the data to re-analyse and confirm their understanding of the findings. Following this, researchers would re-convene to further discuss their perspective and find consensus. Further, a critical friend who was not part of data collection or data analysis raised questions and concerns during the data analysis process that promoted more self-reflection and awareness during data analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This role supported greater depth in data analysis as this layered approach allowed researchers the time and room to debate, review, and agree on the results as well as the rigor of the study (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Second, through the continual processing and reviewing of data based upon sufficient and appropriate data collection and analysis, researchers also provided meaningful coherence. Coherence can be evaluated through judging the manner in which the research question, methods, and theoretical perspectives fits together (i.e., internal coherence), as well as the comparison against other scholarship and theories (i.e., external coherence; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

## Results

Following the guidelines of Braun et al. (2017), two overarching themes were generated from the thematic analysis: *Mentoring Relationship* and *E-mentoring Programme*. These overarching themes each encompassed two themes. Specifically, mentoring relationship included the themes *structure* and *content*; e-mentoring programme contained the themes *benefits* and *barriers*.

## Mentoring Relationship

The mentoring relationship overarching theme referred to the manner in which the relationship functioned. Themes were identified from the thematic analysis of the participants' experiences and interactions within the programme.

**Structure.** The structure of the relationship comprised the manner in which the mentoring occurred. For participants, the key elements that constituted the structure of the mentoring relationship included the method of communication during the e-mentoring meetings, the style of communication and power dynamics, and the termination of the relationship.

Throughout their mentoring relationships, mentors and mentees reported the use of various electronic modes of communication, which included the online platform selected for use by USL, phone conversations, and e-mail exchanges. Participants described their preferred method of communication as depending on their personal preferences, the flexibility of communication, and/or pedagogical practicality. According to Mentor 2, "The most effective format for the mentoring programme is whichever is most flexible." Additionally, "It is a lot easier to draw something. Or, what we're talking about is Xs and Os, so you need some illustration or body mechanical movement that they need to see. So, face-to-face is obviously the best format" (Mentor 1). For mentees, the prevailing sentiment focused on the most effective means of obtaining the information; "I think face-to-face is the best way to get started with the mentoring programme, but once you've made the connection and gone through, I think phone calls or emails would be fine" (Mentee 7). Or, as Mentee 5 stated, "Instead of doing a video chat, I think I would've rather sent him emails or a text message. For example, 'Hey, I've got a question. . . .' or 'Hey, I have this idea, what do you think?'" Despite some participants adapting well to electronic modes of communications, others had a bit more difficulty:

To seamlessly connect with your mentee on a phone call is challenging. E-mail is challenging. The computer programme was supposed to be simple, and it probably was, but I wasn't familiar with it, so it made it a lot more challenging to set up the times for the interviews. That was hard. That was probably the hardest part of the whole thing.

Second, participants discussed the style of communication within their dyad. Participants characterised their communications as collegial and hallmarked by bidirectional, reciprocal conversations in which the needs of the mentees were addressed. "The conversation was pretty much going both ways. She was much better at listening and responding to my questions whereas sometimes I could rant and rave and go off topic" (Mentee 4). Mentee 3 concurred: "I felt like the two of us were sharing information. . . . I don't think it was all one direction. It felt more like a colleague talking back and forth." That said, most participants described the communication as being controlled by the questions and needs of the mentees. "My mentee and I started getting into asking his questions, 'What do you want to know?', and then I started to provide answers and he would talk most of the time, and then I'd come back and make diagrams" (Mentor 2). Participants also pointed to this responsive style of the mentors as allowing for a conversational interaction that was respectful and friendly during meetings. This was best summed up by Mentor 2 when stating, "My mentee and I developed a respectful relationship. . . . I think my mentee respected my knowledge and recognised that I did know more than he did". These types of interactions led

participants to see their relationships less in terms of a traditional mentor/mentee relationship in which the mentee sat under the tutelage of the mentor, but "rather than mentor-mentee, I think you're just colleagues" (Mentor 1). The power dynamic was viewed as equal or, as Mentee 3 said, "I would perceive my mentor as a lacrosse colleague, and a contact."

Finally, the duration of the mentoring relationship varied. That is, two participants maintained their mentoring relationship for the entirety of the programme, two participants lasted several months, and six participants ended their relationship within a month. Generally, the participants discussed two reasons to explain why certain mentoring relationships were terminated prior to the USL planned conclusion of the mentoring programme. First, some participants felt that their immediate needs had been addressed. For instance, Mentee 5 explains, "the questions I had got answered. . . . I came with specific questions, and I got them all answered." Similarly, according to mentee 7, "the mentoring ended because my mentor and I ran out of topics. If I had more stuff, just another year and a half of experience, I guess the [mentoring] might not have ended". Second, other participants had difficulties with coordinating meetings due to busy schedules, particularly during the lacrosse season. For example, "I think it ended there because lacrosse season started. . . . This year, I was responsible for three teams and helping coach three teams and a high school team with the fourth [team]" (Mentee 6). Likewise, Mentor 2 describes:

I got the sense that he was very busy and there were lots of things going on. He was always at a practice or running a meeting. I just don't think he had the time that matched up with my free time.

For the two participants that that lasted through the lacrosse season, the mentoring relationship ended simply because the lacrosse season ended: "by that time, the mentoring programme was finished. So, 'out of sight, out of mind' stuff" (Mentor 1).

**Content.** Participants described the topics that were discussed during their mentoring meetings. The mentors and mentees began their mentoring relationship by introducing themselves at the beginning of their first meeting at the national coaching convention in order to get better acquainted and provide their personal and professional information. For instance, "Again, it was also the first meeting, so we were getting to know each other a little bit better. We were sharing our mutual love and knowledge for the game" (Mentee 3). Likewise, Mentor 2 stated, "In our meeting, my mentee and I first introduced ourselves, said who we were and where we were coming from, described the programmes that we were both coaching. . . . So, sort of that introduction part." This familiarizing with each other's knowledge, experiences, and coaching content allowed the participants to build a common understanding about their skill level, coaching background, and possible topics for later discussion. According to one mentor, "we spent a lot of time building rapport. Yes, by talking about our past experience, and what he hoped to get out of that meeting and these coaching sessions" (Mentor 3). This was necessary content for the participants to build the foundation for the remainder of their discussions in the mentoring programme.

Once rapport was established, the mentees and mentors discussed discrete, disparate, and context-specific content. Topics could be grouped into (a) programme development, (b) drills and tactics, (c) effective pedagogy, and (d) various interpersonal skills. For instance, mentees discussed content with their mentors

that revolved around the successes and needs of their lacrosse programme. Mentee 6 wanted more information on how to start a new programme: “[I wanted] good ideas, growing pains, and lessons about getting a programme off the ground”. Other participants discussed challenges that would impinge on the successful development of their programme:

The main challenge I discussed with my mentor was that I really don’t have a feeder system. If I have, let’s say, 13 freshmen, I probably have two or three who have played before. None of them have significant experience. (Mentee 7)

I had 33 girls in my programme, but could only get 12 or 15 of them to show up for practice at once. . . . How do you work with offence and defence when only your defence shows up? Or, two defenders show up and the rest are attackers? (Mentee 5)

Additionally, mentees sought advice on how to teach specific skills, techniques, tactics, or strategies within a practice or season: “My favourite drill is one that I got from my mentor at our first meeting. It’s a drill I still run to this day. . . . The transition box is a 4-on-3 drill. It’s a keep-away game, basically” (Mentee 8). Often, these discussions were quite in depth and specific to the tactics and skills needed for success in lacrosse. For instance:

[we] talked about how, if you’re coming across the crease slide, how that would work (because you’re staying home on the crease and then coming out across the backside), and I think I was also doing adjacent slides from up top. . . . We got to that level of conversation. (Mentor 2)

Another topic discussed was effective pedagogy:

During our meetings, my mentee and I talked mostly about keeping the kids engaged. Then, we talked about how to break the skills down into all the things I was talking about before (the dodging and scooping) . . . We talked about those: how to look at a skill, break it into components, and then put it back together again. He was much further along on creating the positive environment. (Mentor 1)

Mentor 4 recalled teaching about how to facilitate better learning and skill development by focusing on ways to maximise a drill:

If you are trying to teach someone to recognise relationships on the field, but he can’t throw and catch, and every time you throw him the ball in the drill he drops the ball, it distracts away from what you’re trying to do. So, you take their sticks away and you give them a rubber football, and you have them just use that so you can focus on teaching the reads and tactics, not the skill.

Finally, mentees sought tips on interacting with parents. These relationships were seen as important for growing the sport and gaining support for their coaching. Mentee 4 described how her mentor advised her to deal with parents throughout a season:

My mentor also talked to me about how I could handle/work with the parents. For example, having a coach’s meeting at the beginning of the season, so that we could go over expectations and talk to them before meeting them at a practice or a game . . . the parents got to talk, and realised they knew each other from other things that the girls had done. It was kind of nice to get a premeeting before the season started.

## E-Mentoring Programme

The overarching theme of the e-mentoring programme encompassed the participants’ thoughts and feelings derived from their experiences in the programme. Specifically, the themes identified within the e-mentoring programme centred on the benefits mentees and mentors acquired as a result of their participation and the barriers that made it difficult to remain involved in the programme.

**Benefits.** The coaches expressed three benefits from their participation in this programme: (a) both the mentors and mentees discussed benefits derived from their interpersonal and open communication about specific content; (b) the mentees discussed acquiring lacrosse-specific knowledge and, as a result, confidence; and (c) the mentors discussed that helping novice coaches reportedly left mentors feeling a sense of fulfilment.

Participants described how the mentoring relationship allowed the dyads to create a highly-effective learning environment in which mentees had the exclusive attention of mentors and could ask targeted questions, resulting in highly-impactful interactions.

The mentoring programme just made sense as another way to connect and help coaches. . . . Asking questions at the end of clinics is the most meaningful for participants because this is what they’re wrestling with. . . . Those conversations help translate what they just had six and a half hours of clinic time talking about to their specific problems. (Mentor 2)

Moreover, the learning environment established an open and safe place in which mentees could ask their questions and raise the issues they were facing without the fear of feeling foolish:

Going into the first meeting with my mentor, I was concerned that I was going to look stupid. That’s why the mentoring was perfect. We got away from the lacrosse convention and were off by ourselves, had a little table and a cup of coffee and I could ask any question that I probably wouldn’t ask in a group. (Mentee 8)

Additionally, the mentees reported educational benefits through their engagement in this programme. One mentee said, “I felt good at the end of the meeting with my mentor. I felt like I learned something. It wasn’t a waste of time” (Mentee 5). Likewise, Mentee 6 said, “I was very pleased with what I got out of the mentoring programme . . . learning to be a coach, learning the game, and trying to get kids out there. I needed everything.” Indeed, the mentees viewed the mentoring programme as affording them a tailored education that provided them with the information and confidence needed to be a better coach during the current or upcoming season. “After meeting with my mentor, I felt a lot better going into the season. I had a plan. That’s huge. If you’re going into the season with a plan, you’re doing alright” (Mentee 4).

Finally, the mentors expressed their satisfaction or fulfilment in providing this type of education. The mentors felt personally rewarded because they saw the appreciation from their mentee.

I felt great after my first meeting with my mentee. I know I’ve helped coaches before, but not knowing exactly what it was he was hoping to get out of it made me concerned that I couldn’t deliver. So, I felt very good that he walked away from that feeling like the time was well spent, and that was really what was most meaningful to me. (Mentor 4)

Mentor 1 had a similar experience after the first meeting:

At the end of my meeting with my mentee, personally, I felt good about my answers. I thought that I answered his

questions in a way that gave him concrete things to work on. He seemed to be, on his part, appreciative of the ideas. At the end, I think he was understanding what I was trying to say to him. (Mentor 1)

**Barriers.** In addition to the benefits, the mentors and mentees collectively felt as though (a) technological difficulties, (b) geographical proximity, and (c) scheduling/timing prevented them from effectively and efficiently conducting online meetings throughout the mentoring relationship. First, mentors and mentees discussed the technological barriers encountered while using an online communication platform that was implemented to facilitate communication that most mirrored in-person, face-to-face interactions. In particular, participants described having difficulties navigating this new platform due, in part, to their lack of technological acumen. As Mentor 1 stated, “No, I don’t believe [the online platform] was the most effective format for the mentoring programme. [It] wouldn’t be a bad tool. It was just cumbersome and difficult to use. The platform is decent.” Similarly, one of the mentees explained:

Going to the basics, in my opinion, is probably the best way to go about it. Adding more features, making it more complicated, and creating something where you have to teach people how to use is unnecessary . . . technology, in my opinion, is used most effectively when it’s just common sense, simple. (Mentee 3)

Although some participants had negative reflections toward their initial use of the online platform, participants saw the potential advantages of its capabilities once they were connected. For instance, Mentee 3 continued, “If I hypothetically wanted to show you how to hold a stick or something involving fine details, you definitely have that advantage with [the online platform]”, because it provided a simultaneous voice and video interface that would allow for demonstration.

Second, participants sought to find a way to use effective pedagogical practices within the e-mentoring programme. Mentors believed that face-to-face interactions provide greater pedagogical capabilities than the online communications because they would be able to teach more effectively:

Compared to [the online platform], face-to-face is a lot easier to draw something. Or, what we’re talking about is Xs and Os, so you need some illustration or body mechanical movement that they need to see. So, face-to-face is obviously the best format for the mentoring programme. (Mentor 1)

Mentor 3 agreed: “I think that meeting face-to-face is definitely better. If you wanted to have the ability to do something that might be demos or something, the icing on the cake is face-to-face.” Although the online platform possessed the capabilities for demonstrations via a video camera, there seemed to be a desire for known teaching methods that were comfortable to enact and possessed less chance of complications. “If I were drawing things up, the video part would be great. I’m old enough to be used to just talking on the phone. . . . However, you can have trouble with technology and you wonder if it’s worth it” (Mentor 3).

The third barrier the participants discussed centred on the difficulties in scheduling, particularly finding time to talk on a weekly or monthly basis, and the importance of the timing of the mentoring relationship within the lacrosse calendar year. The mentors expressed issues with putting aside time in their busy schedule to sit down, schedule a meeting, get online, and have a mentoring conversation:

I think the hardest part of all this stuff is finding time for these people. When you’re trapped up at the convention, it’s easy. After that, it’s hard to work that out . . . in order for my mentee and I to meet on [the online platform], I would have to put the times that I was available onto a schedule, which was not easy, because I’m not available consistently. (Mentor 1)

As Mentor 3 succinctly stated, “It just comes down to time. Everybody [has a] busy schedule . . . it’s just prioritizing time that you make something like this work.”

Alternatively, the mentees found themselves displeased with the timing of the programme within the lacrosse calendar year, indicating a preference for the mentoring programme to take place before or at the start of the lacrosse season:

Being in [the mentoring relationship] before you go into the season . . . [after meeting with my mentor] I already had all the drill ideas that I wanted to do and the breakdown for what I wanted to do for my parents’ meeting, so I thought it was really good having it before going into the season. (Mentee 4)

Mentee 5 expressed a similar sentiment: “For me, timing is everything. I need to talk to a mentor ideally in January/February . . . [lacrosse] doesn’t start up until next January. I start gearing up for lacrosse by December.” The mentees denoted that the timing of the mentoring relationship would be perfect for their needs immediately prior to the start of the new season.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine mentee and mentor perceptions of the viability of a pilot e-mentoring programme within a sport coaching context. The results of the present study show benefits and barriers experienced by participants within the USL e-mentoring programme. More specifically, mentees experienced increased knowledge and confidence (Bloom et al., 1998), mentors gained fulfilment (Kram, 1983; Ragins & Scandura, 1999), and both groups encountered issues with technology and scheduling (Bierema & Hill, 2005; Ensher & Murphy, 2008). Of interest were three key findings: (a) trust and respect was quickly experienced by participants, (b) equity within the relationship created collegiality, and (c) technology barriers limited effective teaching methods.

### Establishment of Trust and Respect

Mentees quickly experienced respectful, friendly conversations with mentors in a learning environment that allowed them to ask questions without the fear of embarrassment or reprisal. This type of interaction and relationship seemed to be built upon trust and respect between the mentors and mentees, which is analogous with previous research (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Bloom, 2013). Further, research has shown that the fostering of trust and respect is contingent upon the willingness of the mentor and mentee to work together, resulting in an effective learning environment (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Kram, 1983). The current study also supports these findings. Of particular interest is the speed in which the participants created and experienced trust and respect within their relationships. Past research in both traditional mentoring and e-mentoring portrayed trust and respect as developed within the initiation phase of mentoring relationships (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003, Kram, 1983). This phase has been projected to last between 6–12 months in traditional mentoring

relationships and even longer within e-mentoring relationships (Ensher et al., 2003, Kram, 1983). In contrast, the results from the current study suggest that participants almost immediately experienced the benefits from an initiation phase of mentoring. Based on these results, there are two possible explanations for explaining this truncated timeline.

First, the current study utilised an initial face-to-face meeting at the national convention in order to begin the relationship and build rapport between mentors and mentees. This practice aligns with e-mentoring literature that proposed establishing e-mentoring relationships in person as a way to establish a rich connection between the mentor and mentee (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Rowland, 2012). Second, the USL mentoring programme allowed the mentors and mentees to help select their pairings by providing demographic information to the participants. These factors in the matching process might have provided participants, especially mentees, with the valuable information that would be needed for building trust and respect during their initial meeting. Although the exact reason for the immediate building of trust and respect cannot be pinpointed, it is possible that the use of an initial face-to-face meeting and sharing of information within a self-selection matching process might be advantageous and beneficial at the beginning of an e-mentoring programme.

### Creating a Collegial Relationship

Participants experienced an equitable relationship that allowed mentors and mentees to share information with each other collegially. This relationship was described as friendly with two-way, reciprocal, interpersonal, and professional conversations about various topics within coaching lacrosse. Previous sport coaching literature has described the mentor as guiding the development and learning of the mentee through the use of challenging assignments, sharing trade secrets, and promoting the mentee within the coaching community (Bloom et al., 1998; Koh et al., 2014). Although sport-coaching literature has not described mentor/mentee relationships in terms of equity, formal mentoring relationships have been characterised as unequal in the first stage of the mentorship due to the mentee lacking knowledge and skill in comparison to the mentor (Kasprisin, Single, Single, & Muller, 2003).

In contrast, e-mentoring literature is more accustomed to the equalization of power, especially among diverse populations such as women, minorities, and younger generations (Ensher et al., 2003; Ensher & Murphy, 2008). The current study found the participants also experienced an equitable relationship found within other e-mentoring programmes. Moreover, the “cultural baggage and stereotypes that accompany race, gender, and social class” (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 221) might have been further eliminated in our case because our participants had initially met in person and had a chance to choose their partners. Additionally, both mentors and mentees were already a part of the USL educational process. Although it could not be determined if an initial face-to-face meeting or possible past interactions in the CEP contributed to equity within this e-mentoring program, these factors might have established collegial relationships in these e-mentoring relationships.

### Challenges With Technology

Mentors encountered technological barriers that limited effective teaching methods. General issues with technologies such as computer-skill competency, internet connectivity, and computer

malfunctions are barriers within e-mentoring (Ensher & Murphy, 2008). The current study aligns with these findings. Interestingly, mentors stated that a major technology barrier was the limiting of their pedagogical practices. In past research, effective coaching pedagogical practices within mentoring included, but are not limited to, role-modelling, observations, and demonstrations (Jones et al., 2009; Koh et al., 2014). Some of the mentors stated that they could not provide effective teaching practices, such as demonstrations, when interacting with mentees due to their perceived limits of the programme’s online platform. Although they acknowledged that the video chat could capture demonstrations on camera, this option was viewed as difficult, limited, and less effective than performing them in person. Therefore, using the programme’s online platform to show demonstrations was not considered a viable option for our participants. This could be, in part, due to the focus being on sport coaching e-mentoring, in which these effective teaching practices are common and expected, rather than other fields that might not use these effective teaching practices.

### Practical Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, two lessons learned from the USL e-mentoring programme are suggested. First, participants quickly experienced trust and respect as well as collegial interactions within the USL programme. These experiences might be a result of the matching process, an initial face-to-face meeting, and participant selection from within an established coaching education programme. The results suggest that allowing participants to receive demographic information and ultimately have some choice in the matching process could aid in the development of trust and respect between mentors and mentees. Second, the technological issues encountered by participants included practical issues like confidence in the use of the programme, as well as pedagogical issues such as the ability to use the online platform for effective teaching. Providing programme participants with technological training might mitigate the lack of confidence with the programme’s online platform and facilitate teaching skills that allow the effective use of pedagogical skills such as demonstrations, observations, and feedback. Additionally, the results from the current study showed that participants relied on the technologies that were easy to use and familiar, especially when technological issues arose. Although this is not new within the literature (Ensher & Murphy, 2008), this finding suggests that programmes should not only provide training for participants to feel comfortable with the online programme chosen by the e-mentoring programme, but flexibility be given to mentors and mentees to use the most useful software for their comfort and teaching style. This might help mentors become more effective and programme coordinators find new avenues for online teaching within the specific sport context and culture that could be used in future programmes.

### Limitations and Conclusion

Although the current study provided insight into mentors’ and mentees’ perceptions of the viability of a pilot e-mentoring programme, there were some limitations that need to be addressed. First, the number of mentees and mentors that participated in postprogramme interviews was lower than anticipated. Second, the research was located within a single sport context and culture. Future research might want to expand the focus to other types of

sports, specifically individual sports or noninvasion sports. Finally, all the participants were recruited from the USL CEP. Their relationship with the education opportunities from USL might have had some influence in the participants' perceptions of the programme's quality, instruction, and dynamics within the dyads. It would be interesting to use coaches outside the CEP in future research for comparison.

In sum, the purpose of the current study was to examine mentee and mentor perceptions of the viability of a pilot e-mentoring programme within a sport coaching context. More specifically, researchers sought to find out whether a national sport governing body could use e-mentoring as a realistic alternative for traditional face-to-face mentoring programmes, as well as continue to improve the USL programme. Of interest were three key findings in which trust and respect was quickly experienced by participants, equity within the relationship created collegiality, and technology barriers limited effective teaching methods. In the end, the current study showed that e-mentoring could be a practical, viable alternative for traditional mentoring programmes for a formal national sport education programme. More research is needed to further explore this important aspect of coach learning and development.

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