

# 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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