

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION OF POSITIVE PEDAGOGY FOR COACHING

Mohammad S. B. Razak  & **Richard L. Light**

College of Education, Health and Human Development, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Positive Pedagogy for individual sports is a recent innovation that possibly faces greater challenges than game-based approaches to coaching due to the central role of skill and technique assumed in them and the hegemony of direct instruction in coaching individual sports. Tertiary level coach and teacher education programmes offer one means of challenging the domination of direct instruction with a growing number of university programmes and courses focusing on athlete-centred coaching. This paper reports on a study conducted on the interpretation and use of Positive Pedagogy as an athlete-centred coaching approach to coaching individual sports by undergraduate sport coaching students completing the course in New Zealand. The study highlighted learning through experience, challenge and change, and enjoyment as key important factors that explained what and how the students learned and how it was influenced by post-course experience.

Keywords: Game Sense, athlete-centred coaching, sport coaching, Positive Pedagogy, coach education.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite signs of recent improvement, the uptake of game-based approaches (GBA) by physical education teachers across the world seems to remain limited (Curry & Light, 2014; Pill, 2011). Even in Singapore where the Games Concept Approach (GCA) was mandated by the Ministry of Education, it failed to make a lasting influence upon practice (see Fry & McNeill, 2014). The focus on the athlete as an active learner and the adoption of an inquiry-based approach also presents a challenge for coaches who have been schooled in the 'skill-drill', directive approach (Evans, 2012; Roberts, 2011; Light & Evans, 2010; Pill, 2011). However, there is evidence of its uptake in different forms across a range of settings and cultures (see Díaz-Cueto, Hernández-Álvarez & Castejón, 2010; Suzuki, 2014; Wang & Ha, 2009; Jones, 2015).

The complexity and social nature of team sports offer ideal activities for the implementation of a Game Sense approach and other GBA but little consideration has been given to adapting these approaches for individual sports, such as swimming and athletics, up until the development of Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching (Light, 2017). The proposal for Positive Pedagogy for individual sports developed by Light and colleagues over the past five years or so addresses this neglect by extending the development of a Game Sense approach to individual sports (see Light, 2017).

This paper reports on a study in the scholarship of teaching (see Hutchings and Shulman, 2010) that focused on six students who completed a course on athlete-centred coaching for individual sports (based on Positive Pedagogy). Following completion of a course on athlete-centred coaching for team sports (based on the Game Sense approach), the students were followed for six months after completion of these courses to inquire into the influence the courses had on their coaching beliefs and practice, and attempts to apply this learning to their coaching shaped their beliefs and practice.

Positive Pedagogy

Pulling together some work on applying the pedagogy of the Game Sense approach to individual sports (see Light & Wallian, 2008; Light & Harvey, 2017), Positive Pedagogy (PPed) adapts and applies the basic principles of the Game Sense approach (Light, 2013) to individual sports. Developed from the four pedagogical features of the Game Sense approach described by Light (2013), it also draws on 20 years of research in Positive Psychology and the work of Antonovsky to add to the inherently positive nature of GBA pedagogy to make learning positive through a strengths-based approach (see McCuaig, Queenerstedt & Macdonald, 2013).

PPed adds to the positive emotional responses typically felt by athletes and students when using GBA (see Light, 2002) by drawing Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) Salutogenic Theory and Sense of Coherence (SoC) model and work in Positive Psychology (see Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). These features are used to nurture positive experiences of learning and emotions.

Salutogenic Theory and SoC model

Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) Salutogenic Theory and SoC model centre on the socially constructed resources that allow people to attain and sustain good health rather than on curing disease. His SoC model consists of three social features that most promote good health and well-being, i.e., (a) comprehensibility, (b) manageability and (c) meaningfulness. Comprehensibility refers to how the individual makes sense of and understands events and situations as being methodical and constant – that they know what is going on (Light, 2017). Manageability refers to the individual feeling that s/he can manage stress and challenge in life which includes having the social resources available from collaboration within groups and teams and/or the whole team in dialogue (see Gréhaigne, Richard & Griffin, 2005). According to Antonovsky (1996), meaningfulness is the most important feature that encourages a positive view of life and the future, and encourages people to understand challenges as being exciting, appropriate and worthy of their emotional commitment.

Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology attempts to recompense a fixation of psychology with pathologies and mending the 'worst aspects' of life by endorsing its positive qualities. Its intention to shape 'thriving individuals, finding and nurturing talent, and making normal life more fulfilling', which ties in with the concept of *flow* and *mindfulness* as positive situations that produce learning (Seligman and Csikzentmihayli, 2000, p.5). All five dimensions of Seligman's (2012) PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relations, meaning and achievement) model are evident in Positive Pedagogy, which proposes the positive experiences of learning it can provide. Positive Pedagogy does not explicitly focus on developing well-being or happiness but does propose to foster it (Light, 2017).

Pedagogical features

Positive Pedagogy (1) emphasises engagement with the physical learning environment or experience, (2) encourages the coach to ask questions that stimulate dialogue and thinking in preference to informing players/athletes what to do and (3) adopts an inquiry-based approach to provide prospects for athletes to jointly formulate, test and evaluate solutions to problems supported by a socio-moral environment in which making mistakes is accepted as an essential part of learning (for detailed explanation see Light, 2017).

The course and setting

The study was conducted on six students from a total of 30 enrolled in the year-three course that focused on Positive Pedagogy in a New Zealand university.

All six students had previously completed the year-two course 'athlete-centred coaching for team games'. Both courses focused on developing a dialectic between theory and practice, reflection on experience, taking an inquiry-based approach, collective problem-solving and interaction. Each week of the course began with a one-hour lecture followed by a two-hour workshop on a different day. During the first half of the semester, the students experienced PPed as athletes being coached by the course coordinator with assessment being a reflective individual essay. During the second half of the semester, the students formed small coaching teams to coach their peers during the two-hour workshop session and analysed this session in a formal presentation in the hour that had been used for the lecture. They were assessed on their coaching and presentation.

The study inquired into how six students in a year-three course made sense of the content and the pedagogy used and how this developed over a six-month period following completion of the course. Taking a retrospective and reflective approach, it enquires into the students' experiences of the course, with a focus on their understanding of distinctive aspects of the pedagogy used and on how the students feel it has affected their practice and/or beliefs about their own coaching immediately after they completed the course to the end of a six-month period following completion. The initial interview focused on their responses to the course with the next two interviews spread across the ensuing six months to investigate their experiences of using it (or attempting to use it) in practice and how this shaped their beliefs about Positive Pedagogy.

Reflection, Learning and Experiences

In the 'athlete-centred coaching for individual sports' course, we sought to adopt the student/athlete-centred approach of PPed to facilitate student learning. Literature in contemporary learning theory advocates that learning is implicit and inseparable from engagement in day-to-day social practice (Davis & Sumara, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The work of Dewey (1916/97; 1938/1997), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Varela, Thompson and Rosh (1991) accentuates the role of experiences in learning as an ongoing process of adaptation and a complex, multifaceted and continuous process of change that takes place "within an evolving landscape of activity" (Davis & Sumara, 2003, p. 125). This does not only inform PPed coaching but also informed our shaping and guiding of student learning, and our emphasis on reflection upon experience, dialogue and the use of inquiry-based learning.

From a constructivist perspective, learning encompasses more than just the passive perception and internalization of an external reality but also involves the projection of the learner's life history of experience in a process of change and adaptation shaped by experience (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000). Hence, initial inclinations of Positive Pedagogy content occurred at a non-conscious level to be deduced and made sense through students' learning from the course through coursework, lectures, dialogues with peers and lecturers, workshops and experiences from responses based on their application of Positive Pedagogy in their experiences as learners and coaches. Dewey (1916/97; 1938/97) placed experience at the centre of learning and this is what we set out to do to develop a comprehensive understanding.

METHOD

The study adopted a constructivist grounded theory (GT) methodology to provide insight into personal experience. GT is an open-ended inductive approach that generates and develops theory from data instead of starting with a predetermined theory that is tested (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It involves an ongoing process of data generation and analysis that begins with developing initial codes and then focused codes that are grouped into concepts and categories that theory is developed from. GT is very different to traditional research in which an existing theoretical framework is chosen and applied.

Aims

This study aimed to answer the question: how did six students interpret and use their learning experiences in the course, 'athlete-centred coaching for individual sports' in their coaching and how did it develop over six months following completion of the course?

This study inquired into six of 30 undergraduates who had completed the course with data generated through interviews at the three distinct phases:

1. Retrospective/reflective interviews on their experiences of the course.
2. Their experiences of using innovation from the course in practice.
3. Reflection on how their views may have changed six months after completing the course and how using PPed in their coaching influenced this.

The Site and Participants

The participants were six year-three undergraduates at the University of Canterbury who went through a year-three course on 'athlete-centred coaching for individual sports'. They were randomly selected from the 10 students who agreed to participate in the study. They were interviewed a total of three times individually on campus in June, August and November 2016. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

Data Generation and Analysis

Data were generated through interviews conducted by the first author, which used open-ended questions. We analysed the texts (elicited or extant) and included another stage called 'studying the text' to explore their meaning and situated them into their contexts (Charmaz, 2006). Data generated in the first interview was used for initial coding and focused coding, during which we asked analytic questions of the data, to

deepen our understanding of the participants' life responses and direct the questions to be asked in subsequent data-gathering toward the analytic issues we were defining (Charmaz, 2006). From the second interview, we developed three main themes that are outlined in the following section.

RESULTS

The study identified three main factors that explained what and how the students learned and how it was influenced by post-course experience. Presented in order of importance they are: (1) learning through experience, (2) challenge and change, and (3) enjoyment.

1. Learning through experience

All the students emphasised the central importance of experience for understanding the course content. This was both a reference to being able to 'feel' it at work and reflecting on it during workshops and in the assessment tasks. They felt that having the opportunity to feel what it was like to be coached in this way over the first six weeks of the semester was invaluable for understanding the pedagogy and how it could be used. The dialogue involved in the workshops between them and the teacher, and between them and their peers encouraged them to reflect upon their own immediate experiences and to think about their learning. The increased interaction, compared with traditional coaching, also helped them appreciate the humanistic approach taught to them in lectures and to understand the emphasis on 'feel'. This is what Fosnot (1996) calls deep learning situations that involve understanding the concepts or 'big ideas' that constructivist perspective on learning suggests underpin it. For one student:

Like the swimming lesson by (the professor), you progress to each kind of stage and breaking it down to 'feel' what it was like when you struck the water and so on. I learnt another way and area of coaching that can be useful especially in individual sports. (Tom, interview 2, June 2016.)

Prior to this, Tom was so used to drills and past experience to coach his students with the notion that if it had worked for him, then it should work for them too. However, after having gone through the course, Tom felt that he has progressed to manage his sessions better in his work as a coach:

In respect to the groups of athletes I was assigned (team) to this year, I was expected to just teach them the basic skills in football. However, what I thought they needed to work on was actually their tactical understanding of the game as well. Through Positive Pedagogy, I was able to design and manage the sessions which would achieve those objectives. They (athletes) all knew what the game plan was but due to their somewhat lower skill levels, the application of PP was quite inconsistent to them. (Tom, interview 3, November 2016.)

Max felt that the experiences of the course encouraged him to change his coaching. He felt that real-life behavioural and cognitive issues of his students might create tensions in coaching and learning between them. This was exacerbated by the fact that the college was a low decile college plagued by behavioural issues and low cognitive ability of the students. However, he said that using the athlete-centred approach helped him to be flexible in his coaching to help his students and helped

them understand what was required and to try and learn differently as an example of them developing *comprehensibility*. This is reflected in the following two quotes:

So with surfing, you can feel the way you are on the wave and how you are going smooth or stuff so it will be used to put into the practical sense into surfing. Hmm, but yeah in terms of actually the things that I have learnt I guess it's just kind of learnt another way and area of coaching that can be useful, I mean especially in individual sports the way I kind of been developed.
(Sam, interview 2, August 2016.)

It's quite difficult at first but it was more of the experience I had learnt about the different people learning differently. Like after doing it (Positive Pedagogy) for a while you can see 'Oh that might need some direct coaching', that was why I might be able to sit back and check on positive stuff and questioning more. That kind of coaching was more like gaining experiences (for me) especially in looking at how athletes were like during the coaching (of running) and responding to the Positive Pedagogy. (Max, interview 3, November 2016.)

The biggest challenge for Indiana was asking questions to athletes and getting them to figure out the problems themselves. This is a common problem for coaches using GBA (see Roberts, 2011; Wright and Forrest, 2007; McNeill, Fry, Wright, Tan & Rossi, 2008; Forrest, 2014). He said that his students were so accustomed to being told what to do by their previous coaches that they would just look at him in astonishment and they found it difficult to adjust to his coaching style but that paying attention to how they felt and seemed to be engaging or not engaging saw them begin to change:

As they were used to being told what to do and having coaches making all the decisions. This transition is tough both on coaches and athletes. However, over time these athletes started to open up and decided to think and figure out on their own. (Indiana, interview 1, June 2016.)

As he adjusted his coaching to suit the needs of the group, this made learning more meaningful and made clear links between the detailed foci of activities to the end aims of the session and season (Light, 2017), his students began to rely less on him as they became more able to solve their problems themselves. This is highlighted by a response from Indiana:

For these athletes, I decided by putting them into smaller groups and assisted them by providing suggestions when they were stuck and questioned them in their decision supportively. This process took at least a couple of months before they were able to do these on their own and was rather effective when it happened. After a while, their reliance on me began to decrease significantly and they were able to discuss with their team. My role as the coach changed but still remained the same in terms of constantly challenging them to improve. (Indiana, interview 3, November 2016.)

This seems to be consistent with the suggestion by Renshaw, Oldham & Bawden, (2012) that learning should not only just involve the cognition but also the affective, emotional and corporeal learning that encourages long-term engagement with the activity. The emphasis placed on the whole person resonates with Light's proposal for

an (2017) holistic and humanistic approach to coaching. The emphasis placed on 'feel' in reflection and learning and the need for the coach to have empathy with athletes all reflected a more holistic approach to human experience and learning.

2. Challenge and change

Any new pedagogical approach that challenges existing beliefs about coaching or teaching typically makes practitioners or students uncomfortable and requires time to adapt to (Piaget, 1950). From a Piagetian perspective, this can be seen as a learning perturbation that the learner has to assimilate or accommodate. Our teaching about PPed and the Game Sense approach emphasised the need to establish an appropriate level of challenge to engage athletes and this is what we attempted to do with the students in the courses. Lectures dealt with the major challenges of taking up a Game Sense approach or Positive Pedagogy approach, which is designing learning experiences and managing learning, and questioning for learning (see, Harvey & Light, 2017; Light, 2013; Pill, 2011).

For the six students in this study, the questioning for learning seemed to be the most challenging aspect of Game Sense pedagogy and PPed. The literature suggests, this is common (Wright & Forrest, 2007; McNeill, Fry, Wright, Tan & Rossi, 2008; Forrest, 2014). Immediately, following the completion of the course on athlete-centred coaching for individual sports, the students were inspired to embrace this challenge. Over the following six months, they took on the challenge of developing effective questioning during their coaching and felt that meeting this challenge gave them confidence and a better understanding of the approach. For example, one participant noted:

(The) part I find difficult is questioning but it comes with practice. Trains you into looking through different lenses of coaching as well. Not just about the technical skills it is also about the feel and the experience of the sport itself like in the karate session. This new coaching approach has deepened my understanding of sport as more than just the game and more than just skills. (Thomas, interview 2, August 2016.)

The courses on athlete-centred coaching the students had undertaken focused on developing questioning that is open-ended, stimulates thinking, fosters curiosity and promotes interaction between the coach and athletes and between athletes (see Harvey & Light, 2017). James was inspired by how his tutor and professor had demonstrated the use of questioning in his course:

I have taken inspiration from how (his tutor and professor) were able to question effectively to the athletes to help develop their techniques. As a result, I have made sure a lot of my questions have become divergent, and only convergent in certain coaching situations. (James, interview 1, June 2016.)

The students in the study also enjoyed being challenged to think deeply and critically about their own coaching beliefs and practice during the course in ways that took them out of their comfort zone: "Helped me step out of my comfort zone to develop sessions. Greatest thing I've learnt from this course is that there is more than one style of coaching." (James, interview 1, June 2016.)

They all enjoyed the way the approach challenged the 'status quo' of direct instruction coaching where the coach tells the athletes what to do and making decisions for them. Over the duration of the course, they also came to like the idea of having an open mind and being reflective and open to learning, resulting in a change of ideas. As a surfing instructor working for a small company, Sam did not have the opportunity to apply and adapt what he had studied but talked about how it had changed his thinking about and disposition toward coaching:

I haven't really practically used it or changed my coaching practically but it changed the kind of ideas and thoughts on some coaching that I could implement. I reckon it's a good way to coach so if I can find a way to make it happen and use it, then it should be very helpful for both my coaching and the athletes and students. (Sam, interview 3, November 2016.)

3. Enjoyment

All students singled out how the innovative course was fun, how enjoyable it was and the positive emotions that they felt in the lectures and workshops. For example:

It was fun, cool to compare between team to individual sport and how it was slightly different. Cause the team sports was obviously games-based stuff and you were working with tactics and changing modified games and having different numbers of people on each team using a games-based approach. (Max, interview 2, August 2016.)

For individual sports, you can't really play a game like a team-based game but the activities like karate and swimming were cool and they were interesting and most enjoyable. The athlete-centred way of coaching certainly made it more enjoyable and beneficial. Especially in swimming, swimming coaches just put on the board and tell you to jump and just swim but you don't get one on one coaching like Positive Pedagogy which was so beneficial, fun course and cool. (Sam, interview 3, November 2016.)

The overwhelming endorsements of the course given by the six participants seem to have been largely shaped by how much they enjoyed it. They consistently said it was fun and enjoyable and this seems to be influenced by it being comprehensible and meaningful with them feeling challenged but able to manage this challenge as is evident in their discussions on their post-course coaching. These are, of course, features of PPed appropriated from Antonovsky's SoC. Many of the students' background were in a team sport and they were anxious when they had to present on an individual sport. However, they were permitted to pick a specific skill component of team sport. This is captured in the following comment:

I actually enjoyed doing the assignments in this course. It was really kind of interesting. We used a team sports basketball but the free throw element as the coaching element. It was kind of an individual aspect of the sport and it was fun because it gave another aspect to the sport and looking at how you can make a better free throw. Being able to present it to others and had them engaged in discussions in the workshops were the highlights of our presentations. (James, interview 2, August 2016.)

Others just enjoyed being exposed to new ideas and concepts that challenged the status quo and made sense to them through their experiences of the course. For example:

Overall, the course was rather interesting and an eye-opener. It provides an insight into the new coaching style of Positive Pedagogy. As traditional coaching and Positive Pedagogy have significant differences, Positive Pedagogy can be used to adapt to various situations. Instead of spoon-feeding the athletes with information, Positive Pedagogy challenges athletes' thinking by modifying the session. (Indiana, interview 3, November 2016.)

They also invariably mentioned that the innovative course also prepared them for the expectations and requirements of real-life experiences of a coach. James explained that being a coach required the following:

...coaching requires a lot of actually running the session is only the very smallest part of it, you got to plan and know what you are going to do, you got to be prepared for the coaching and then afterwards obviously studying it, you got to be really reflective on it and analyse your own performance and write. (James, interview 3, November 2016.)

The students expected to acquire sound pedagogical approaches so that they were better prepared for the coaching world. The interviews also suggested that some preferred to have a number of pedagogical approaches so that they can experiment and apply them to situations. We suggest this arose from encouraging openness to new ideas and thinking during the course.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted after completion of the year-three course, *athlete-centred coaching for individual sports* to inquire into any lasting learning and how it might have interacted with practical experiences of coaching. This also allowed us to free the participants from any sense of being under pressure to say what they thought we expected them to say. They had no more courses with us and we had no more possible influence on their grades. This suggests that the decisions of five of them to apply and adapt what they had studied in class suggests a real engagement with athlete-centred coaching for individual and team sports.

Our focus was on the course on individual sports in the previous semester and despite some of them teaching team sports, it had clearly changed their thinking about and dispositions toward coaching. Both athlete-centred coaching courses emphasised deep understanding of the ideas, philosophy and principles underpinning the courses instead of using a model for coaching this way. The effectiveness of this approach is suggested, at least in the short term, by the use and adaptation of the content of the two courses in their coaching. Although we focused on 'athlete-centred coaching for individual sports' the previous course, 'athlete-centred coaching for team sports' had a very significant influence on their learning:

I had done the course on 'athlete-centred coaching for team sport' the year before and I was kind of already into that. If I hadn't done that one I probably be

like 'oh wow this is a very different one, I didn't know you could coach in this way'. (Sam, interview 3, November 2016.)

We must also consider how volunteering to participate in our study suggests that these six students had a positive attitude toward the course but, nonetheless, the study suggests that the pedagogy used and the content delivered worked in changing the students' beliefs about coaching and their immediate practice. Sam was a surfing coach and despite some discussions with the second author about how to apply ACC to his coaching, felt constrained by his having to work with others in the company. He said he was still hopeful of being able to slowly adapt ACC to his coaching but felt that the courses he had done had a profound influence on his thinking about coaching:

This course had a big impact on me. I think more now on my whole way of coaching rather than just on session plans. It gives you another way to coach and you can't rely on one method only. It broadened my coaching experience, maybe it will be beneficial for developing better athletes with experience. Yes, it's helped me become much more understanding of why all athletes are not the same and I now believe that being a good coach means being able to utilize each coaching approach effectively. A good coach should not limit itself to one approach but should be constantly pursuing ways to improve their athletes. (Sam, interview 3, November 2016.)

The participants in this study acknowledged the value of experience, of appropriate levels of challenge (intellectually and physically) and their enjoyment of it in engaging them and changing their views on and practice of coaching. These positive learning experiences can be explained by using the PERMA model (Seligman, 2012) and suggest the benefits of teaching them as we wanted them to coach. The PERMA model suggests five conditions that promote happiness and well-being from a psychological perspective, which are: positive emotions, engagement, (positive) relationships, meaning and achievement. All these states made a contribution toward the participants' learning and dispositions toward PPed. The contribution of these five elements of the PERMA model make toward positive experiences of sport, and motivation has also been identified in more general research and writing on sport and physical education pedagogy. This includes the importance of positive emotions such as joy (Lloyd & Smith, [in Butler & Griffin, 2010]) and delight (Kretchmar, 2005 [in Griffin & Butler]), engagement in learning and the building of relationships and sense of belonging (Light, 2008) and relatedness (positive relationship) in supporting motivational regulations of the athletes they coached to perform well in sports (Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009). Perceptions of competence have been shown to enhance intrinsic athlete motivation of athletes and making them responsible for their own performance as a form of achievement (Deci and Ryan, 2000), with experiences during the course of our study and meeting the challenges of the course set providing a sense of achievement for them. Learning through experience and reflection upon it during the course and in their adaptation of PPed to their coaching after completing the course provided engagement in learning and gave it meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into how experience can be stressed in the strategy of learning to provide what Lave & Wenger (1991) see as comprehensive understanding

instead of the abstracted, articulated understanding that is emphasised in formal educational settings. It encourages questioning what it means to learn or to know something and what the aims of practice-based courses in coach and physical education teacher education should be. As Light and Fawns (2003) argue, to know in sport and other physical activity is not to be able to articulate it but instead to be able to demonstrate knowledge-in-action. This is what we suggest we can see with the six participants in the study. As with Light & Fawns (2003) proposal for learning in and through TGfU, this learning occurred through a learning 'conversation' between the body in action and the mind expressed in speech.

The focus of this article is on the contribution this course and the methods adopted toward making a lasting and positive influence on graduating students' dispositions toward Positive Pedagogy as an ACC approach. However, we suggest that there are some lessons here for educators in higher education settings more broadly to consider designing courses that have their theories interacting with practice through critical reflection to make learning more engaging, participative and meaningful.

FIRST AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Mohammad Shah is in his third year as a doctoral candidate at the University of Canterbury (New Zealand), College of Education, Health and Human Development. He received a Bachelor's degree in Physical Education, Sports Science and Recreation Management from Loughborough University (United Kingdom) and a Master's degree in Physical Education from the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. He is currently teaching as a tutor at the School of Health Sciences. His research interests include moral and ethical learning in PE and sports, pedagogy in game-based approaches, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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