**CHAPTER 6**

**Understanding grassroots football coach education in England through creative fiction: Connecting the past to the present**

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**Introduction**

In England, circa 30,000 learners per annum participate in grassroots coach education that is organised by The English Football Association (The FA), with the intention of enhancing their coaching knowledge and practice. Globally, The FA is recognised as one of the largest providers of football coach education, often praised for their innovative approaches and collaborative coaching research programme (Allison et al., 2016). While coach education across sport has historically been critiqued for its decontextualised, bureaucratic, and dogmatic nature (Lyle & Cushion, 2017), in 2016 The FA relaunched its coach education pathway to offer a more learner-centred approach. This approach aimed to include a bespoke *in situ* support package for level 1 and 2 learners informed by social constructivist assumptions (Chapman et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2021b). In doing so, The FA demonstrated a shift towards more liberating forms of coach education policy, moving away from oppressive and authoritarian approaches witnessed between the 1960’s and the early 2000’s, and providing more authentic learning experiences (Chapman et al., 2020).

While it has been suggested research exploring football coach education is sparse (Armour et al., 2016), over the past five years several publications have significantly enhanced our understanding of contemporary issues concerning football coach education in England. These include how coach education influences coach learning (Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Watts & Cushion, 2017; Webb & Leeder, 2021), the socially constructed nature of coach education (Chapman et al., 2020), and the way coach education policy is created, disseminated, and experienced by coach developers (Allanson et al., 2021; Dempsey et al., 2021a, 2021b).

In building upon these empirical studies, the aim of this chapter is to utilise a novel creative fiction method to demonstrate how the evolution and progression of football coach education in England has impacted upon the learning and development of Brian, a fictitious coach. This chapter contains three vignettes that highlight Brian’s involvement with FA coach education over a twenty-year period, which are explored and analysed in relation to contemporary literature on football coach education and development. It is hoped this chapter provides an innovative way to understand and reflect upon the nuances and complexities of football coach education.

**Method**

To understand football coach education in England, this chapter utilises the method of Creative Fiction (CF). CF is a method rarely adopted within sports coaching literature and can be described as the process of imagining and (re)crafting a story that did not actually happen as it has been told (Jones, 2006). As such, the content of this chapter is not based on systematically gathered data. Instead, the writing takes on a creative literary and narrative approach to highlight certain aspects of lived experiences that may resonate with others (Potrac et al., 2016). This (re)construction provides the readers with a more personal, rather than professional, account of a character, event, or environment (Jones, 2006). Such a process does not aim for objective ‘truth’, instead, it offers a sense-making opportunity to the reader that is engaging, informative, and evocative (Sparkes, 2002). Readers should act critically when engaging with this chapter and consider their own lived experiences to develop an appreciation of the account. In using such a method, and in the context of this chapter, the authors’ roles and experiences as coaches, mentors, and coach developers, as well as researchers, offered a nuanced resource to form the inventions of situations.

Reflecting our privileges, Brian, our fictitious coach, is white, middle-aged, working-class, and a parent. Brian is a volunteer at his local football club and his account is retold from multiple experiences over time. Brain’s story starts with a reminiscent account of his previous experiences on FA formal coach education, before extending to his most recent experiences now returning to coach education some twenty years later. The remainder of this chapter offers three short fictional vignettes that represent moments in time on Brian’s learning journey. To support the reader in critically reviewing these vignettes (Sparkes, 2002), a short analysis follows each vignette and explores some of the pertinent messages. Towards the end of each analysis questions are posed to enable the reader to critically reflect on their own experiences.

**Fictional moment one: Here we go again!**

***How hard can it be?***

*‘It’s booked’* Brian shouted from his computer chair. Leaning back, arms folded *‘well I’ve done all this coach education malarkey before, how hard can it be this time round?’*

Brian procrastinated about his time on his old FA level 1. *‘It was easy last time, I just turned up, listened, played a bit of football and got a certificate’.*

*‘Thanks for booking it, Dad. I’m excited about attending the course alongside you, what do you think it will be like? I can’t wait to get started’.* Robbie exuberantly walked into the room.

*‘Nah it will be OK.* *Wouldn’t get your hopes up though, when I did my level 1 ages ago, I just had to copy what the tutor said and did. Easy really. Was boring if I’m honest, didn’t learn much. I can’t imagine that the level 2 will be much different, but I can show you everything we did before if you want. I’ve still got the big booklet; it’s even got the test that I passed in it, obviously we all got 10/10. It’s around here somewhere. Look under that box will you Robbie’.*

***Today is the day***

*‘Hurry up Robbie we’re going to be late, trust me we don’t want to be late on the first day, the tutor will pick on you. It’s all about standards, Jeff told me that’.* Jeff was the course tutor who led the level 1 that Brian *passed* in the 1990’s.

*‘Yeah, I am coming dad, I’m looking for my tracksuit bottoms, have you seen them?’*

*‘Nope, not seen them but I told you; you should have packed your bag last night and forget trousers you need shorts, and long socks. Make sure they’re long too you’ll need to pull them right up’.*

Robbie peered out the window; the thick fog lay sat across the nearby farmers field, the condensation from the window ran down Robbie’s nose. *‘You sure Dad? It looks freezing’.*

*‘Certain, now hurry up!’* Brian shouted as he walked out the front door.

Some thirty minutes later, after navigating the rush hour traffic, the pair arrived. With frustration, Brian slammed the car door *‘Robbie, I told you we would be late, you had better be prepared tomorrow. Come on, up the stairs. We’re meeting in the top classroom’.* Brian stomped up the stairs. *‘Hurry up’.*

*‘Morning guys in you come, take a seat’.* Jasmine pointed towards two chairs placed together at the back of the room. *‘I’m one of the tutors we will get started soon, I think we’re just waiting for a few more’*.

Brian stepped forward *‘Sorry we’re late, he* (pointing sternly over his shoulder at Robbie) *lost his shorts this morning, couldn’t find them anywhere apparently’.*

*‘Don’t worry still plenty of time, we have all day.* Jasmine looked across to Robbie, *I tell you what, you’re braver than me, it’s cold out there, perhaps too cold for shorts!’*

Brian looked perplexed as he walked towards the back of the room. *‘Too cold for shorts?’* he thought. Brian pulled out his chair and sat down, but his mind wandered *‘Jeff said we must always wear shorts and Jeff was always right, he played professionally, and I still remember that pass, it flew through the air, nearly took my head off’.*

**Interpreting fictional moment one**

Brian’s reintroduction into formal coach education has provoked reminiscent memories of his previous experiences. As such, his actions exhibit a somewhat negative perspective in comparison to Robbie. Brian’s story so far exemplifies common critiques of coach education research, which all describe the bureaucratic, institutionalised, and strict nature of much provision (Chapman et al., 2020; Piggott, 2015). Furthermore, Brian’s story illustrates how imitating the mannerisms and behaviours of the coach developers(s) was an expectation to pass the course, where a hidden curriculum was normalised, e.g., that a certain attire was compulsory (Graham et al., 2016). Similarly, the discourse between Brian and Robbie alludes to two further tenants of previous coach education: 1) the focus of the previous level 1 course was not associated with *learning*; and 2) how the level 1 course was perceived to be an activity which gave the *right answers*.

The conversation between the characters exemplifies how course completion and certification was the primary objective of both the learner and the tutors during previous iterations of The FA level 1, specifically in and prior to the early 1990’s. The coaches attending these iterations were tested and a right or wrong answer was perceived to exist. Little to no previous consideration was paid to the contextual environment and the prior understanding of the coach’s *world.* As such, previous coach education could be construed to be ineffective (Dempsey et al., 2021b; Piggott, 2015). At the end of this vignette, some of Brian’s predetermined thoughts were challenged, specifically through the introduction of FA tutor Jasmine which hints towards some development and progression in FA policy (Dempsey et al., 2021a, 2021b).

***Reflect upon fictional moment one and consider***

1. What similarities exist between your previous experiences of formal coach education and Brian’s?
2. Based upon your experiences, what would you tell Robbie to expect prior to attending his first coach education course?

**Fictional moment two: A new beginning**

***This is… different?***

Jasmine came gliding back into the room. *‘Hi everyone! I’m Jaz*, *an* *arrival task is up on the PowerPoint for you, take a look, but we are still waiting on one or two so go and grab a cup of tea and a biscuit and get to know people on your course, you’re gonna learn plenty from one another I can promise you that’*. Jaz strolled through the room, welcoming everyone, *‘we will make a start in ten minutes! Get chatting to people in the room, us included’* pointing to herself, and Francis, the other tutor delivering the course. Brian stood next to his table, sipping a coffee, sharing smiles, and introducing himself to people as they walked past. Brian got chatting to half the class, he loved a chat! *‘Nice start to a course this isn’t it?’* Brian proclaimed as he took his seat once again.

Throughout the morning Jaz and Francis did not dictate, instead, they offered questions: How can *you* help your players feel safe? How can *you* engage players in your sessions? How can *you* get your players having fun? This generated discussion and debate. Brian, at times felt uncomfortable. He hadn’t been encouraged to reflect on his coaching before. However, he found it refreshing to hear from learners rather than the tutors. It was a collaborative process. *‘We are going to do some planning, we want you to get into groups of three, have a chat, and put on a session you feel comfortable coaching. Don’t worry, it’s not an assessment, we want to help, we are here to support you on this process’*. *‘Dad, I’m going to go with James and Naomi’*, ‘*Yeah no problem son, I am going to stick with Ray and Jen, if that’s ok with you guys?*’ Ray and Jen nodded with a smile while grabbing some flipchart paper and pens.

***This course is great!***

Onto the pitch, discussions continued. Cones were grabbed swiftly, two sets of bibs, and a bag of balls followed the trio. *‘What’s your thoughts Ray, Jen!? That wide enough?’* Brian continued to stride, counting each step to check the gaps between each cone. *‘We need that goal moving here, then just shift that other one across five yards!’* shouted Jen. Ray and Brian grabbed the goals and put them into place, finally, they were ready to go. *‘Ready when you guys are’* Jaz shouted. *‘15 minutes, enjoy it, have fun, and show us what you planned’*…

*‘That’s time!’* Jaz announced. An applause rippled across the group as Brian, Jen, and Ray finished their session. *‘Feedback time’* Brian mumbled to himself as the three coaches strolled up towards Jasmine and Francis. *‘Here we go guys, brace yourselves’* Brian said with a nervous grin on his face. *‘Get into threes or fours, have a chat, then nominate one person to feedback to the coaches please’* Jaz bellowed to the rest of the group. This came as a shock to Brian! Feedback was shared between the learners. As the group walked in, Brian strolled back with a smile on his face, Jasmine breezed past *‘good job Bri, I enjoyed that, get in with Ray and Jen, and start reflecting on your feedback and I will come round to have a chat in a bit’*, *‘Will do Jaz’* Brian said, giving Jaz a big thumbs up. Pats on the back followed by other learners, *‘hmm this is very different’* Brian thought to himself… *‘I hope the rest of the course is like this’*.

**Interpreting fictional moment two**

Brian’s apprehension towards returning to formal coach education appeared alleviated from the very first interaction he had with Jasmine. Such a change has been advocated as a positive move away from more authoritarian approaches in the past (Chapman et al., 2020). Instead, Brian was provided the opportunity to communicate and build relationships with others. Such a process supports research advising the need to include learners *in* the course, rather than being simple recipients *of* the course (Dempsey et al., 2021a; Nelson et al., 2013). Utilising such an approach offered learners the opportunity to discuss and debate their own complex realities in grassroots football (Potrac et al., 2016). Brian could feel the benefits of effective collaboration and support amongst his peers and coach developers alike. This was encouraged within an environment shaped by genuine attempts by Jasmine to socially construct learning on-course (Dempsey et al., 2021a, 2021b). These attempts enabled Brian to interrogate previously unexplored dilemmas and uncertainties around his coaching practice, that all coaches seemingly experience (Jones, 2006).

Recent research has advocated for courses to be guided by social constructivist principles (see Fosnot, 2013), which assumes learning occurs through shared knowledge and understanding (Paquette & Trudel, 2018; Dempsey et al., 2021b). For clarity, social constructivist approaches should not be considered a prescriptive set of methods or activities within coach education (Cushion, 2013). Rather, social constructivist informed coach education emphasises an underlying epistemological position which assumes knowledge is co-constructed through a combination of individual and social factors which develop over time within historical and cultural contexts (Cushion, 2013; Webb & Leeder, 2021). It must be noted, however, that courses underpinned by social constructivist principles are not free from the influences of key stakeholders in relation to choices of content and assessment methods used (Dempsey et al., 2021a, 2021b). As such, consideration on both is required when designing future formal coach education provisions, and how such processes fit into a much wider system of coach development.

***Reflect upon fictional moment two and consider***

1. What are the benefits of a social constructivist informed football coach education course?
2. What topics/content are likely to offer the most benefit to grassroots football coaches on a time-bound, level 1 or 2 course?

**Fictional moment three: At loose ends…**

***Why isn’t this working?***

*‘I don’t understand. I’ve been using the session plan templates from the level 2 course but I’m not getting the response I expected’* Brian grumbled to himself, as he watched his players laughing and joking, failing to grasp the aim of the session. Brian turned to his assistant coach Martin, *‘Jaz made this look so simple on the course, honestly, she said the practice has lots of ball rolling time, is games based, and kids love it’*. Martin looked sceptical, with a sense of disbelief and frustration in his voice. *‘I’m sure it was great, but right now the boys simply don’t get it. They don’t seem to want to listen. They would rather talk about school or this new app on their phones they keep going on about’*. Brian scratched his head, trying desperately to think back to the course content and remember a strategy to engage and connect with his players.

It’s been six weeks since Brian completed the course, and six training sessions haven’t gone to plan. Martin continued to lose his patience as the practice broke down once again. *‘Come on Bri, why isn’t this working? You’ve done the course, nothing is changing’*. Brian remained silent, staring at the pitch before him as 12 confused faces stared back. Brian reminded himself of something Jaz mentioned on the course, *‘Remember, if you ever need any mentoring support post-course, I’m just a text or email away!’*

Brian unlocked his car, chucking his equipment into the boot and slamming the door shut. He reached immediately for his mobile phone. *‘Hi Jaz, sorry to text you out of the blue, but I was wondering if you could help me…’*

***Hope at last!***

*‘Hey Bri, great to see you again! Nice little set up you have here’*. Brian’s eyes lit up as he saw Jaz walking across the pitch towards him. *‘It was really brave of you to reach out Bri, I’m looking forward to supporting you and Martin over the next few weeks’*. Brian instantly felt at ease, knowing that Jaz, a FA tutor and mentor was here to offer personal mentoring support in his own environment. Brian and Jaz caught up, with Brian summarising his current issues. *‘I understand where you’re coming from Bri. Ok, so all I want to see tonight is you delivering your session as normal. I had a look at the plan you sent over, it looks great, I love the first progression! I will be here by your side if you want some feedback or help either during or after the session’.*

*‘Sounds good Jaz, thank you so much for coming down again, I really appreciate it’.* Brian took a deep breath, scanning his session plan one last time for the key coaching points he had scribbled down. *‘Come on, you can do this!’* Brian said to himself, as he wandered over the damp grass towards the group of players Martin was able to herd together. Brian glanced over his shoulder, making eye contact with Jaz on the touchline, who simply responded with a thumbs up and a warm smile. Brian turned to the players. *‘Right boys listen up! Tonight, we are working on combination play…’*

**Interpreting fictional moment three**

The vignettes within this section outline Brian’s journey following the completion of the updated level 2 course, while highlighting the inherently ambiguous and challenging nature of grassroots football coaching, with Brian experiencing a sense of vulnerability and a desire for support from diverse networks (Potrac et al., 2016). Indeed, much research has outlined how formal coach education often fails to meaningfully impact upon coach learning and practice due to its decontextualised nature (Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Watts & Cushion, 2017), with courses remaining “fine in theory but divorced from the gritty realities of practice” (Jones et al., 2012, p. 313). For Brian, while he positively experienced the level 2 course, he still struggled to bridge the theory-practice divide and implement new pedagogical approaches within his practice.

However, Brian’s story demonstrates the importance of bespoke, experiential-based learning opportunities for grassroots football coaches, which are grounded in the messy realities of practice and provide the chance for social interaction and critical reflection (Nelson et al., 2013). To address this apparent flaw of much formal coach education across football and other sports, sport coach mentoring programmes would appear a worthwhile pedagogical approach to facilitate coach learning *in situ* and provide authentic learning opportunities (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021). Brian alluded to the significance of Jasmine, who performed a dual role as both a FA tutor and mentor. Specifically, through harnessing her experiences, Jasmine was able to resonate and relate to the challenges Brian and Martin were facing, while offering realistic solutions and strategies to mitigate their issues. Thus, Jasmine was able to provide Brian with tailored and personalised mentoring support to help him (re)connect with a new generation of young footballers. Support from a FA mentor, coupled with social constructivist informed FA coach education, has provided a more liberating form of coach development for Brian, helping to develop critical consciousness which is situated in context (Chapman et al., 2020).

***Reflect upon fictional moment three and consider***

1. How can coach education prepare football coaches like Brian for the ‘reality shock’ that follows course completion?
2. Besides formal mentoring schemes, what other avenues of support might be available for grassroots football coaches?

**Critical analysis: Connecting the vignettes**

This chapter has adopted a novel creative fiction approach to demonstrate the development of football coach education in England, and its impact upon Brian. When connecting and analysing the vignettes, three overarching themes have become apparent. Firstly, football coach education delivered by The FA is not static or fixed. Rather, coach education policy is continually reconstructed and adapts over time within cultural contexts and influences the practices and experiences of both coach developers and coaches (Chapman et al., 2020). Indeed, the first vignette demonstrates how Brian’s first experience of FA coach education in the 1990’s was typified by authoritarian pedagogical approaches. In contrast, vignette two demonstrated an attempt to socially construct learning *with* coach developers and learners such as Brian (Chapman et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2021b).

When interpreting the vignettes, the second theme identified relates to the perceived benefits of a learner-centred approach, informed by social constructivist principles towards coach education (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). For example, the second vignette highlights how Brian appreciated the facilitative role of Jasmine and benefitted from a more collaborative approach (Ciampolini et al., 2019; Paquette & Trudel, 2018). However, it would be remiss to entirely reject instructor-led coach education programmes (Paquette & Trudel, 2018). The success of any learner-centred coach education programme is dependent upon shared understanding and interpretation between organisational stakeholders (Dempsey et al., 2021a, 2021b). Thus, the interaction of numerous factors, such as programme design, delivery, and engagement, suggests that not all ‘learner-centred’ coach education policy is successful (Paquette et al., 2019).

Finally, the third vignette demonstrated that despite Brian’s positive experiences of The FA level 2 course, he still encountered challenges when attempting to bridge the knowledge-practice divide and apply content into his own coaching context (Stodter & Cushion, 2019). Therefore, football organisations administering coach education may want to consider their availability of post-course support for their coaches. The use of *in situ* visits from coach developers or formal/informal mentoring support could help to situate and authenticate coach learning, with coach developers and mentors providing guidance, observing practices, and stimulating critical reflection (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021). Once again, while *in situ* visits and mentoring support has its benefits, it is important to appreciate that these approaches are not straightforward and carry their own complexities (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021).

**Recommendations for practice**

The design and successful implementation of coach education programmes is a complex process. Coach education provision forms part of a wider social, political, and economic system which involves multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, course designers, coach developers, and coaches (Culver et al., 2019). Each of these stakeholders who operate at differing levels across an organisation’s hierarchy, will possess varying degrees of power to instigate ‘change’ (Chapman et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2021b). To date, while broader research investigating coach education has focused on the perceptions and experiences of individuals at a micro level (e.g., coaches), the influence and impact of policy on football clubs and players is rarely considered. Thus, there is a need to understand how both meso (e.g., programmes) and macro (e.g., organisational) structures mediate coach learning and development (Griffiths et al., 2018). Consequently, based upon the fictional vignettes within this chapter, this closing section offers brief recommendations for stakeholders operating across the macro, meso, and micro levels of football coach education to reflect upon and apply within their current cultural contexts.

***Macro level (organisational) recommendations for policymakers***

Football coach education programmes are temporal in nature and are (re)constructed over time (Chapman et al., 2020). Coach education policies devised by sport organisations (e.g., The FA) are often reflective of wider government or external institutional agendas (Culver et al., 2019; Dempsey et al., 2021b). Hence, there is an evident need for policymakers at a macro level to begin critically reflecting upon the historical, political, and educational factors which have shaped previous and present football coach education programmes to enhance future provision (Chapman et al., 2020). Furthermore, if sport organisations wish to enact coach education policy informed by clear ontological and epistemological assumptions (e.g., social constructivism), it must be recognised that coach education forms part of a wider ecological system with specific curricula demands (Dempsey et al., 2021a). Policymakers, therefore, should continually explore how coach education policy is interpreted and enacted in everyday practice by coach developers at a meso level (Dempsey et al., 2021a).

***Meso level (programme) recommendations for coach developers***

Coach education policy is designed and disseminated at a macro level and is subject to several influences. However, how it is recontextualised and understood by coach developers operating at a meso (e.g., on course delivery) level is significant, as this will subsequently influence how learners experience a course. The behaviours and practices of coach developers are largely ideological and structured by prior experience, with coach developer training often failing to modify dispositions and beliefs (Cushion et al., 2019; Leeder et al., 2019). Therefore, it is recommended that coach developers reflect upon the frequency and quality of training provided to them by their organisation, while continually seeking further opportunities for professional learning and development (e.g., further resources, support networks).

In drawing inspiration from this chapter, coach developers may wish to consider the potential benefits and opportunities that creative fiction and other storied forms of communication might offer learners embarking on a football coach education programme (Douglas & Carless, 2008). Storied representations of individuals’ experiences of engaging with football coach education pre-course, during, and post-course may help learners to grapple with the relational demands of the coaching role and stimulate critical reflection (Douglas & Carless, 2008; Potrac et al., 2016).

***Micro level (individual) recommendations for football coaches***

Research exploring the learning of football coaches has highlighted how any espoused knowledge from coach education is understood in relation to coaches’ existing beliefs, knowledge, and practice (Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Webb & Leeder, 2021). Consequently, while football coach education may attempt to be learner-centred and underpinned by social constructivist assumptions, ultimately coaches ‘cherry pick’ ideas, with concepts either rejected, adapted, or accepted due to their biography (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Problematically, while changes in ‘coaching knowledge’ may occur following coach education, there is often minimal change to coaching practice and behaviours, emphasising a knowledge-practice divide (Stodter & Cushion, 2019). On a micro level, and to support their learning, it is recommended that football coaches engage with mentorship opportunities to enable knowledge and practice to be developed experientially (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021). Having support from a mentor or critical friend who can objectively record behaviours and practice whilst skilfully facilitating critical reflection will help football coaches to understand new concepts in light of their existing assumptions and beliefs (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Nonetheless, formal coach education and mentorship represent just two potential learning opportunities for football coaches. Thus, individuals would benefit from appreciating that becoming a football coach is an idiosyncratic process, involving a “complex blend of learning” situations, experiences, and opportunities which occur throughout a coach’s life (Stodter & Cushion, 2017, p. 323).

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