

Reclaiming the 'competent' practitioner: Furthering the case for the practically wise coach

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## **Abstract**

The principal purpose of this paper is to further the case for phronesis as a progressive coaching concept. It is thus argued that coaching be considered (1) as a ‘geneology’ (Foucault, 1971), (2) as contextualist in nature, (3) as being imbedded in the minutiae of action, and (4) as ethical practice. To these we add the notions of emergence and situational literacy. Although to a degree theory-led, we co-constructed the argument through recourse to an 18 month ethnographic study of the Norwegian national female handball team, and in particular the actions of head coach Marit Breivik during the period of investigation. What was embarked upon here was akin to a contested dialogue between phronetic theory and the available empirical data. In advocating the general case of coaching to be informed by phronetic principles, we reclaim the coach as a ‘competent’ practitioner, a term involving emergent self-awareness and discernible judgement in relation to contextual goings on.

## **Introduction**

This article emanated from a concern about the nature of coaching knowledge. That is, what is missing from the official or dominant, rather mechanistic, discourse; of the continuing gap between the wisdom and erudition required for coaching action and what professional bodies and coach education programmes espouse as legitimate know how. Kemmis (2012) refers to this disjuncture in as a ‘longing for something else’ not currently present. In response, we further the case for phronesis as a credible coaching concept. This is not only in relation to better understanding the term and its associated meanings, but also its development as a constructive framework for future coaching practice. Having its roots in one of Aristotle’s intellectual virtues, phronesis can be considered as a “practical wisdom related to dealing ethically with context, practice and experience” (Hemmestad, Jones & Standal, 2010, p. 450; Flyvbjerg, 2001).

In doing so, we build on the work of Hemmestad, Jones and Standal (2010, p. 448) who claimed phronetic action as being better able to take account of the “social intuition and complexity of coaching than many of the perspectives used to date”. Here, coaches were posited as making judgements and decisions in the manner of ‘virtuoso social actors’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001). It is a position which also develops that taken by Cassidy, Jones and Potrac (2016), who argued for the notion of ‘occupational value’ (Evetts, 2011) within coaching. Such a concept is to do with progressive flexibility and adaptations to emerging challenges; with a sense of purpose and contribution; and with the taking of careful judgements in highly complex situations.

Although we agree with others (e.g., Kinsella & Pitman, 2012) that reflective practice is crucial to phronetic or practical wisdom, we take issue with Frank’s (2012, p. 57) assertion that if “practitioners reflect enough...a kind of practical wisdom will [eventually] develop”; that such wisdom can germinate from deconstructive reflection alone. Rather, we contend that there needs to be more reconstructive insight into the nature and direction of coaches’ reflections

(Jones, 2019). Indeed, this is a criticism which can be aimed at phronetic social science itself; that it lacks definition in terms of practical application. Consequently, as portrayed so far, phronesis in coaching continues to be a rather evasive concept.

Having said that, the purpose of this paper is not to present a clean progressive packaging of phronesis, but rather to open a range of guided conversations about what phronetic coaching could look like. In linking phronetic concepts and interpretations to critical coaching research, we develop the case that coaching should be increasingly considered as contextual practical wisdom, thus breathing informed life into, or reconceptualising, the simplistic, oft quoted phrase that good coaches ‘do the right things at the right times’. In terms of structure, we first outline the principal tenets of phronesis that have particular applicability to coaching. These include considering coaching (1) as a ‘geneology’ (Foucault, 1971), (2) as contextualist (not relativist) in nature, (3) as being imbedded in the minutiae of action, and (4) as ethical practice. To this we add the notions of emergence, defined as “the arising of coherent patterns and properties during the process of self-organization” (Goldstein, 1999, p.49), and situational literacy. This latter concept involves a discerning ability to ‘read’ the relational coaching landscape and respond accordingly; thus containing an intellectual and perceptive ‘condition of the mind’ (Dunne, 1993).

Although to a degree theory led, we co-constructed the argument through recourse to an 18 month ethnographic study of the Norwegian national female handball team (the LKS [Landslaget Kvinner Senior håndball]), and, in particular, the actions of head coach Marit Breivik (Hemmestad, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. Why did we chose this case study? Precisely because the data suggested, and at times spoke explicitly to, phronetic notions above others. This was particularly in relation to the evidenced sociality and morality of practice, to Breivik’s awareness of structure and agency, and an overriding desire to change a culture. A principal aim of the wider project then was to uncover some of the seemingly implicit professional

competence demonstrated by a widely regarded (and internationally successful) coach. Consequently, as the data were read and re-read, Flyvbjerg's ideas about phronetic action became primary sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954), whilst the unfolding findings were used to develop, refute, extend and qualify the framework in question (Puddephat, Shaffir & Kleinknecht, 2009). Although in many ways the paper can be seen as deductive in nature, where a theory is used to see what previously may have been hidden, the purpose was to go further than take advantage of 'concept agency' (Blumer, 1954). Hence, in deviating from phronetic thinking (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Hemmestad et al, 2010), the data from the case study were used to develop the notions of emergence and situational literacy to additionally illustrate the "living breathing world in question" (Puddephat et al, p.4). Consequently, following the tenets of socially shared cognition (Chi, 1996), what was embarked upon here was not only a collaboration between ourselves as researchers, but a contested dialogue between phronetic theory and the available empiricism. It was also an iterative process replete with exchange, re-negotiation and subsequent mutual intelligibility. Hence, although the data were interrogated in relation to an existing framework (phronesis), every effort was made not to force-fit them into the theory. Intense reflective and reflexive action (Findlay, 2002) were thus engaged in to best secure an authentic engagement with both data analysis and related theory development. In essence, we tried to steer a course inclusive of both 'theoretical discovery' and 'theoretical refinement' (Puddephat et al 2009, p. 15). The objective of the paper then extended further than mere commentary on the virtues of 'phronetic coaching'; a goal previously achieved earlier (e.g., Hemmestad et al, 2010). Rather, it was to present a rigorous illustrated case for phronesis as a central coaching concept, thus following Jones's (2019) advocacy for greater 'theoretically orientating' or 'suggestive' work by critical coaching scholars.

The goal of paying such detailed attention to the gradation of everyday actions was to both generate an insightful understanding of, and provide suggestions for, discerning coaching

behavior. Indeed, according to Flyvbjerg, in the study of human affairs, “there is only context-dependent knowledge” (2001, p. 71); in that, such knowledge and experience are at the very heart of proficient, skilful activity. For him, it is only through detailed cases and the related power of example that a nuanced view of reality can be developed. Similarly, for Dreyfus’s expert and Bourdieu’s virtuoso actor, knowledge can only be generated through intricate engagement with a plethora of concrete cases in respective areas of expertise (Flyvbjerg, 2001); a sentiment articulated earlier by the psychologist Hans Eysenk (1976), a converted critic of case study methods who stated: “sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases - not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!” (cited in Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 73). Although this a position which advocates that ways of thinking and acting can be generated from a close analysis and proximity of the studied reality, it holds the caveat that the subsequent everyday life portrayed is not to provide definitive, verifiable knowledge, but rather “input for on-going [albeit guided] dialogue and praxis” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 115).

In presenting and advocating this case for phronetic coaching, we reclaim the coach as a ‘competent’ practitioner (Sellman, 2012). Following Sellman (2012), as opposed to its current common understanding of ‘skills based learning’ and attributes to be mastered, we take the term competence as involving emergent self-awareness and discernible judgement about both agency and structure in relation to contextual goings on. Here, we evoke Heller’s notion of ‘intellect[al] rationality’; that is, a reflexive capacity to judiciously evaluate norms and subsequently release abilities and propensities as appropriate. Not only is this idea grounded in the immediate and wider critique of cultural practices, but also involves ‘anticipatory thinking’ and the “free play of the human spirit” (Heller, 1984, p. 129-130). In this respect, the competent practitioner encompasses both a critical understanding of current practice, and the abilities to imagine and deliver alternative horizons. We conclude the paper, not only with a summary of

the principal points made but, through relating them to phronetic action, furthering the case for bringing the craft knowledge of coaching back to the fore. As argued previously (Jones, 2019), this is not in terms of some mythical 'art' of the activity, but through a clear deconstruction of what 'virtuoso' coaches do and how they do it.

### **Coaching as Phronetic Practice**

#### **Coaching as a genealogy (Foucault, 1971)**

According to Neitzsche (1969), the genealogist writes 'real history'; real politik as opposed to formal politics and policies. This includes an investigation into how power influences (and has influenced) knowledge; into why we know what we know. Hence, there is no deception into an ideal; into general de-contextualised policy statements which are often empty and banal. The genealogist thus can be considered a diagnostic; one who unearths the longer continuities of cultural practices through paying attention to minor shifts, small details and subtle contours. Similarly, coaching (or any phenomena for that matter) cannot be considered as an independent manifestation or appearance, but rather as a descendant of that which came earlier. This was a case recently made by Jones and Ronglan (2018) who, in borrowing from Crossley (2011), gave recognition to interaction as sedimented in a certain past which allows a particular present. Although the connection between a seemingly abstract Foucauldian concept (i.e., genealogy) and concrete practice (face-to-face interaction) can no doubt be problematic, the point being made is that phenomena, however manifest or expressed, are related to previous events, be they a continuation of, or in opposition to. Consequently, any attempt at a context free definition or explanation of action, by necessity lacks understanding of the pragmatic way that action is understood by those who comprise it. As stated by Flyvberg (2001, p. 43), "a grammar is no language".

Although taken from a more conventional temporal viewpoint, such a perspective echoes that of Vygotsky, which takes as its point of departure the social-historical determination of human development. Here, it was argued that behavior and learning could only be explained through recourse to history and culture (Jones, Thomas, Nunes, & Viotto Filho, 2018). Any interactions (e.g., between coach and athlete) then, need to be located “within their contextual history; of the previous interactions between participants, and what such participants know of each other” to be fully understood (Jones & Thomas, 2016, p. 66). This is not to say that coaching (or any phenomenon for that matter) in its present guise seamlessly evolved from previous manifestations; in fact, the opposite is largely true. Indeed, due to the general absence or casualness of critical scholarship before the turn of the last century, sports coaching’s geneological disposition was one of ‘lighthearted positivism’; a different picture altogether from much of which exists today. Geneology then is able to take account of discontinuities without ever forgetting that such forces are always opposing or exposing something, and thus are related to what came earlier. The point here, as emphasised by Foucault, was to protect the case made against any arbitrary constructions. Consequently, by demonstrating the subjective, created character of institutions and phenomena, geneology creates the possibilities for alternative action; what things can be.

Within the context of this paper, it could be argued that Marit Breivik appreciated the nature of coaching as a historical one; that is, she was aware of the traditional performance logic embedded in the field (Hemmestad, 2013; Hemmestad & Jones, 2019). Consequently, any altered discursive practices and ways of talking had to be based on or related to previous ones. Far from being a prisoner of history, although cautionary and careful, what engineered here was not so much a gentle evolution but something of a disjuncture with the past. In her own words;

*...many players experience a huge difference between the coaching philosophy (evidenced) at the national squad and what they receive at their clubs. Thus, several of them have needed more time to understand 'how we do it here' and where we 'want to go' in several situations. This is one of the main reasons why the processes in the national team has moved a bit slow (at times), particularly when it comes to shared leadership and involvement...the players are used to getting told, with us it's a question of asking them 'what do you think? How can we approach the problem?'...it's a challenge for many players, this different way of working.*

Far from being a functional process, however, it was one riddled with frustration; an emotion echoed by the players. In the words of one;

*If we suggest something, something we think can make us better, he (the club coach) does not bother to listen. We are supposed to do what he says. With the national coaches, it is the other way around... (they want us) to give input and to discuss matters. So that is frustration in the club team, because, after all, we are the ones on court.*

As stated, this change was not reflective of a clean break. Hence, although Marit was aware of the dominant mechanistic performance-related discourse when appointed, and had a desire to change it to a more egalitarian one, the rupture was very much tempered by the need to maintain some continuing authority in the role. Consequently, despite the creation of self-developing 'teams' within her squad where responsibility for sections of play was passed to 'athlete groups', Breivik still maintained a position of 'first among equals' in context. This was expressed through ensuring the problems set for the athletes to work through were bounded within given frames, together with the need for the latter to collaboratively discuss any potential solutions with the coaches. In this way, she both encouraged athletes' engagement with the new discourse, while protecting them against feelings of over responsibility and her own role obligation as a head coach. Hence, there was change *and* a continuation of the same.

The change was also reflected in the language-in-use at the LKS. This was most obviously seen through Breivik's use of metaphors, particularly associated with learning, improvement and growth. The orthodox language of mechanical quantitative performance was challenged and replaced with re-framing analogies designed to catalyze further learning through personal pedagogic-related progression. For example, she designated the coaching and support staff (including herself) as “*gardeners*” whose work comprised of giving the players enough “*light, water and sun*” so that they could “*flourish*”. In developing the horticultural theme, the concept of “*weeding out*” irrelevancies, most often as related to practices and intentions, was also prevalent, thus providing both focus and space for athletes to develop and “*grow*”.

History then is fundamental to understanding coaching; be it as a continuation of or a rupture against what went before. Unfortunately, many, if not most, coaching scholars can be criticised for their lack of historical sense when interpreting what they ‘see’ in their collected data; a criticism even more pertinent of coach educators. It is evident that not enough care has been taken to transform coaches' *knowing* into a form of *knowledge*. This then is the genealogical structure; a structure to be respected and considered when coaching.

### **The coach as a contextualist**

We consider coaching to be context dependent; that coaching knowledge is situationally sensitive. Such a statement reflects a rhetorical consensus. However, unlike others, who tend to leave the sentiment as just that, we acknowledge the need to problematise the claim further. This is not so much in relation to positivistic absolutism (as no serious scholar or coach believes a one-size-fit-all manual is appropriate for coaching), but in drawing a distinction between contextualism and relativism. Flyvbjerg (2001) addresses this question through recourse to what he terms ‘situational ethics’; that is, the attitude to the situation or issue under examination within the society being studied. Consequently, as opposed to an epistemology which is totally

relative or post-modernist in character, an ‘anything goes’ belief where coaches merely exist as contingent actors to context, emphasis is placed on cultural structuralism; that is, on the interplay between creative practice and the social structures which both restrict and enable it (see Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016). In this way, idiosyncratic morality and personal preferences as justifications for actions are protected against. Alternatively, such motivational beliefs or intentions are located within the common view of the culture under study. Hence, although acknowledgement of the necessity of structure is made, it is a sceptical one with considerable recognition given to agential, relational social power (Seidman & Alexander, 2001).

To say that coaching is contextualist locates it within a time and place. This is to say that appropriate action (that is, action considered appropriate as related to the objective) should be positioned within the wider discursive, cultural and temporal order of events. For contextualists then, knowledge depends on the context in which it is uttered, where intersubjective agreements are evident, with such agreements providing the structure for action. Contextualists also assume a background knowledge of participants; a knowledge of the social rules and what is meant when X says Y. It involves recognizing and using the prevalent norms that exist in society to generate and maintain successful social interaction.

Bourdieu termed it as practice having “a logic which is not that of the logician” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 86). What was referred to here was the practical reasoning social actors use to organise their perceptions and thoughts in terms of the larger whole. It is a stance which acknowledges the existence of a consensus or understanding regarding coaching that goes beyond just being ‘context dependent’, to one that is socio cultural and, hence, deeper in nature (Fetzer & Akman, 2002; Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016). Contextual practice is thus considered to be created by, and to act upon, individuals, with coaching considered to play out as situated action, where interactions instigate meaning making processes.

Consequently, although it may be true to say that contextualism is in some form relativistic, not only does it reject any form of ‘absoluteness’ of epistemic facts or standards, but simultaneously does not open the door to unbridled skepticism or relativism. Such a position concerns the development of what Kosík (1976) termed the ‘dialectical-critical’ method which “sensitizes us to the mediatedness of things, their complex interconnections, and their relation to the whole” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 18). In doing so, recognition is given to both socio-historical considerations, and the agency evident within the terrain of daily life.

Although Marit desired change, in terms of outlook and practice, she was keenly aware of the wider national handball context which served as something of a relative brake on unbridled aspiration. Nevertheless, she was determined to challenge the given hegemonic orthodoxy through the advocacy of an alternative strategy, where the emphasis was very much on the athlete as an active contributor to the learning process. Hence, in revisiting the club versus national tensions cited earlier, she considered that;

*...many players need more time to understand where we are (how we do it) in the national team, and where we want to go. There is a huge difference between the coaching here (at the LKS) and (what the players get) at the clubs. This has slowed the process of involving and committing the players into our programme. However, we are slowly moving the players to be at the centre of the process...they have to be ‘present’ all the time; they have to be stronger and control their own situations better.*

In relation to the liberty available (to a coach), the question can still be asked of how can a novel and distinctive direction be created taking account of established interests? For Flyvbjerg (2001), what can or should be engaged in here is a procedure of ‘dialogue’. Taking account of the requisite that all interactions take place within a given discourse (in this case the context of international sport), the point is to ascertain and decide upon a variety of viewpoints before deciding on the most appropriate course of action. In Nietzsche’s (1969, p. 119) words

“the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe [this] one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing be”. Taking account the views of others was plainly evident in Breivik’s coaching. Precisely how this was manifest in practice is illustrated in the examples below;

The team are working on a tactical move, playing full court. The players are struggling to realise the intention; the coaches stop the practice. The coaches ask the players to go into groups, to talk about what ‘the problem’ is and what to do about it. [T]he coaches [then] call the players together to report on the decisions made (field note).

At a pre-game meeting, the coaches tell the players they have full confidence in them to decide on the (upcoming) game strategy. The players are grouped and given tasks; what are our strengths? How should we use them (in the game) tomorrow? What are their strengths and how shall we approach them? Each group then presented 2-3 points to the full squad from which a game plan was developed (field note).

The coaches present a short video of the (upcoming) opponents. They ask the players in small groups of 3 to discuss what they see and how to play – “*how shall we approach this?*” Suggestions are subsequently discussed with the larger group (field note).

When questioned as to the purpose here, Breivik claimed a focus on the co-construction of knowledge, to draw on as many sources as possible, to produce progressive practice. Individual scenarios and suggested actions were thus worked through by numerous groups. What resulted was consensual, negotiated strategies which also affirmed the individuals who created them. This inclusive, collaborative means of working, however, was not reflective of unlimited athlete ownership or power. Alternatively, in line with contextualist thought, Breivik

was aware of the limitations evident when implementing such ‘power sharing’. In this respect, she constantly pondered if the “*giving of ownership*” to the players was “*too much*” for them. (It was never considered she gave them too little!) In her own words;

*My idea is to make the players even more committed to the community and to [their] own contribution (to personal and team development). Sometimes I know I put too much on them... I expect too much when the players are not ready for it. Then, I need to adjust my actions and expectations.*

The athletes’ group discussions, although no coaches are often present, is always framed by the objectives and the intentions of the camp...“*They [the players] can’t determine all the content of the camp...the coaches have already set some working goals, some frames*”.

It is an outlook which some have claimed bears elements of philosophical pragmatism (Dewey, 1910, 1929; among others) whereby certain theories are regarded primarily as instruments or tools for coping with reality. Here, the utility of any action is dependent on its problem solving power, with theories needing to be modified in light of experience. Similarly, Breivik’s coaching carried echoes of Neurathian considerations where one cannot replace a floating raft all at once, just one plank at a time dependent on need and conditions; an anti foundationalist stance. Hence, although it was plain she wanted to change the culture at the LKS, the reconstruction had to be in line with contextual considerations.

### **Coaching as being grounded in the minutiae of practice**

Although macro considerations are necessary for coaches to engage with, the emphasis within phronesis is on the particular. This is not so much in terms of context micro management

and continuous detailed planning (although such planning undoubtedly has its place) but because it “is in the deep, [distinct] details that genuinely important interrelationships are [developed and] expressed” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 114). In the words of Rorty (1985, p. 173), “the way to re enchant the world is to stick to the concrete”; where value is placed on daily practices which constitute a given field of interest (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This was the case recently made by Jones and colleagues (Jones & Corsby, 2015; Jones & Ronglan, 2018) in ascertaining the importance of the quiddity or 'just whatness' of coaching. The search undertaken is for the "forces that make life work" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 135). It is a call to further the ‘downward shift’ in coaching research and theorizing (Jones 2019); of the necessary engagement and assignation with the “inherent liveliness of (coaching) life and its time signatures” (Back, 2015, p. 821). It is also to develop Gardiner’s (2000, p. 5) social project into mundane daily action; to explore and appreciate the ‘fine grain’ and ‘connective tissue’ of coaching activities by critically focussing on the “practical accomplishments of skilled social actors in the course of their day-to-day lives”. Priority then should be given to the particular (Nussbaum, 1990), what Nietzsche (1968) termed as having “seriousness in the smallest of things” (p. 182).

In partially addressing such an agenda, Jones (2019) conceptualised such practice as ‘the work of repair’. It is work that honours the minutiae required to fulfil the social contract of coaching, be that between coaches and athletes, teams of coaches, or any other significant contextual relationship. Neglecting such attention leads to resentful rotting connections, static ‘game’ plans, and a lack of direction, empathy and structure; “in essence, the social rules which govern coaching would collapse” (Jones, 2019, p.340). Such elements of care were very evident in Breivik’s and the other LKS’ coaches’ practice. For example,

...the coaches often walked back from the gym to the hotel. These were social encounters about what they had seen and noticed during the day. Although covering many issues, from individual technique and welfare to game plans and particular

exercises, the focus was on the ‘little things’ (“*She has more power now, but particularly so in left attacking situations*”); “*How was Kari today? She avoided eye contact with me a couple of times; I think we need to keep an eye on her*”; “*Susanne didn’t seem to enjoy it today, I’ll check with her later*”; “*There is something not free in Heidi’s movement; maybe that injury is still there? We need to find out*”) (field note).

The case for attention to be placed on the little things within coaching is, of course, not new. Suffice to say that the current study builds on earlier work (e.g., Jones, 2009; Jones, 2019), which previously argued for investigations into what coaches actually ‘see’ or observe in context, and how such observations become motivation for action. The argument made extends from taking care to notice ethico-political qualities of coaching relationships, to developing the related ‘local orderliness’ which always takes precedence over given rules. It is to resist the drift towards a ‘totally administered world’ (Gardiner, 2000) in relation to coaching, thus giving greater credence to human experience, consciousness and responsive action within the activity. In this respect, it is to give consideration to what Gardiner (2000) termed the ordinary, daily expression of care and solidarity, and Jones (2009) the ‘world of small realities’, which can have a lasting impact of performance. Similarly, Flyvbjerg (2001) makes the case for a ‘knowledge of details’, the basic concerns of any action; concerns which were repeatedly evident in the coaches’ practice at the LKS. In agreement, we believe to better understand and develop coaching we should start with practice; that is, the focus should be on the everyday people and phenomena that constitute the field of action. This is not only in relation to better understanding coaching, but also as a guide to improving or changing it.

### **The coach as a moral actor**

No claim or discussion about the coach as a phronetic practitioner can avoid the issue of values and morals. Although Flyvbjerg (2001) grounds his Aristotelian interpretation in what he terms value-rationality, little assistance is provided about what those values actually relate to. Indeed, it appears that the quest for appropriate virtuous or ethical coaching behavior ends with a call to be reflective on personal value judgements in relation to future action (Hemmestad et al., 2010). Perhaps that is only to be expected given the emphasis on context and adaptation. The counterweight offered to relativism within such thinking is that the values alluded to here relate to those of the wider society; that is, the moral collective climate or common view in the culture under study. Having said that, moral climates are subject to various changes and forces, resulting in ‘common sense’ shifts, for better or for worse. So, should a coach’s ethical decisions simply mirror those of the society he or she inhabits?

Many have argued that coaching should be considered a ‘moral enterprise’ (see Hardman & Jones, 2011) with the coach as an ‘enlightened general’ engaging “athletes in a virtuous mutual quest for human excellence” (Loland, 2011, p. 21). Although offering some orientation or guidance, a better way forward would be to engage with Flyvbjerg’s admission that “there are rules and there is the particular” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.49). Here, phronetic action gives credence to both agency and structure, where a “degree of flexibility [is maintained] within given carefully considered boundaries about what is good and advantageous both to the individual and the social collective” (Hemmestad et al., 2010, p.450). It is this ability to take into account the individual, the group, and social norms, in addition to personal beliefs and context, that possibly marks out the phronetic thinker. Here, recognition is given to the fluidity of actors within and with any environment, and to the consequences of action somewhere always having effects somewhere else. This was a principal conclusion drawn by Santos (2017) who claimed that coaches concern themselves with numerous ‘things’ (e.g., the individual and the collective, athlete welfare and learning, utterances and interactions, performances, in

addition to wider expectations) in the quest to develop and demonstrate ‘caring, sensitive, progressive’ practice. To act ethically or morally then, requires much more than social care for individual athletes. No doubt the ‘unique case’ is important and needs to be treated on its merits, but for the phronetic coach such merits are not divorced from wider concerns.

Again, we claim such judicious thinking was evident in Breivik’s actions as the head coach of the LKS. In this respect, her ideas and exploits were also reflective of ‘gagns menneske’; a Norwegian concept literally translated as being a ‘useful human being’. It is a belief related to care and consideration, more so of others than the self. The example below reflects such actions;

The coaches try to find alternative ways for the athletes to demonstrate their worth. For instance, Jenny, very good in games but not good on this [upcoming] test. Marit steps in, *“Hey Jenny, I want you to find a trail to run in the woods. This is your test [to] find an alternative for you here. Run this, then run it again when we come back next camp; I want to see if you’ve gone faster”* (field note).

Relatedly, it regards the person as having value in and of themselves apart from what they can do. To behave in such a way was what Breivik tried to embody and teach the players (Breivik: *“We have to develop the individual in this holistic and moral way. As a moral person and a handball player”*). These were actions clearly perceived by the players;

*...she really cares, not only about me as a player, but also about me as a person* (Thrine).

*...that is her strength, she cares about us as people. I really think she is focused on me, for me to have a good life* (Sissel).

Although her goal was to educate the athletes (and others) within the LKS in an ethico-political way, Breivik was nevertheless aware of the boundaries in this regard. Such limitations related to living and working within a performance discourse. It was an issue which she deliberated upon constantly, how to merge and manage a humanistic socio-pedagogy within a culture of competition and the pressure for championship success. Her decisive navigation of these turbulent waters was helped by her conviction that more ‘rounded’, socially-aware players were actually better equipped to deal with the ever unfolding uncertainty of the playing context; attention to ‘gagns menneske’ then, simply made them better athletes.

### **The emergent character of coaching**

In line with general complexity thinking, Higgs (2012) contends that professional work is characterized by an absence of certainty. It is a position reminiscent of Schön’s (1987) classic metaphor of such practice as a ‘swampy lowland’ where messy, confusing problems lie; problems that defy technical solution. Within such a perspective, action is the precursor and not the beneficiary of knowledge, with understanding emerging in and through the action as opposed to merely practicing what is already known. Indeed, for Higgs (2012, p. 77), borrowing from Aristotelian language, “episteme, techne and phronesis dance together” to produce the practice. Of course, they don’t just dance, but do so in relation to what is known and what is desired. In this respect, practice is considered as constructed by individuals and groups, is constantly evolving, while being both “situated and situational” (Higgs, 2012, p.76). In the words of Higgs (2012, p. 76);

For each practitioner, not only is his or her evolving practice, knowledge and capabilities the result of experience and context, but each practice action or episode is influenced by and, optimally, shaped to suit the particular practice.

The point made here is that a coach can be someone who both acknowledges emergent action while seeking to simultaneously shape that action. In many ways then, practice is considered the concurrent developer of knowledge. This is not to say that just doing something comes first; rather, that practice provides the context (the goals, objectives, rationales) of and for action. It is also a position which rejects the Cartesian dualism of thought standing behind action, in favour of thinking as being grounded in everyday action (Dreyfus & Hall, 1992). This was the case made by Jones and Wallace (2005, 2006) who, in positioning the coach as an orchestrator, gave credence to both the initiatory and responsive functions of coaches' work. In this respect, coaching was conceptualized as an emerging phenomenon with coaches constantly engaged in adapting the environment towards conscious intentions. Far from being confined to a didactic pedagogy or interaction between a coach and athlete(s), coaching can consequently be better considered as comprising constant action and reaction through permeable boundaries between and among various agents toward a generally agreed goal (Bowes & Jones, 2006).

There was ample evidence of such behaviour in Marit Breivik's work; behaviour that both respected the emergent nature of coaching in addition to actively shaping it. For example, Marit calls for time-out and gathers the athletes. She starts by saying she is satisfied so far, before providing advice about how the performance can be improved. One of the athletes interrupts; agreeing with Marit, before offering an opinion. Marit nods supportively. The game recommences (field note).

The coaches set up an exercise. It's not working. A senior player breaks away to chat with another coach. The exercise is stopped, the group gathers around the coaches. The point made by the player is discussed and implemented in the re-started practice. The exercise runs better (field note).

Marit's appreciation that coaching, at best, can only be loosely scripted was further reflected in her objective to make the athletes curious. She constantly spoke of the need for them to experiment, before reflecting on that experimentation and its consequences. This was manifest in sessions constantly being punctuated by breaks where the coaches would challenge the players in terms of 'what they saw' and 'how they experienced particular situations'. This language of discovery further emphasized or formulated the emergent nature of the practice which Breivik not only respected but sought to generate. Hence, rather than contest the uncertainty inherent in her coaching, she actively embraced it.

### **The coach as situationally literate**

In positing noticing (Mason, 2002) and observation (Luhmann, 1995) as crucial to coaching, Jones and colleagues (Jones, Bailey & Thompson, 2013; Corsby & Jones, 2019) outlined the necessity for coaches to 'read' their respective working landscapes. Noticing was considered an act of attention with that being noticed becoming intake for action. The general message concerned the requirement to be more sensitive to the needs of the moment. To be contextually literate, however, demands more than increased consciousness to unfolding events. This is because "there are many things we may look at but not 'see', things that we 'see' but whose details we do not 'notice', and things we see or even take note of but do not engage with" (Jayyusi, 1993, p.5). It is precisely these 'non-visible' aspects that surround, shape and comprise a context that need to be seen and judiciously acted upon for contextual literacy to be claimed. Such literacy, of course, can be witnessed as coaches' practical wisdom or phronetic coaching action (Hemmestad, et al., 2010).

Recently, Jones (2019) argued for coaches to develop a quality of mind to practice well. Borrowing from Dewey (1910) and Heller (1985), the case was made that such a concept concerns both a critical evaluation of habit-bound norms before acting in a reasoned yet

enlightened manner. Attention is paid to the immediate, before inferential future-orientated thinking characterised by “ardent curiosity, fertile imagination and experimental inquiry” is employed (Dewey, 1910, Preface). Such a view adheres to phronetic actions in terms of possessing habits of “attentiveness that makes one’s past experience flexibly available [while] allowing the present situation to unconceal its own particular significance” (Dunne, 1993, p. 305). It is also a practice characteristic of Schön’s reflection-in-action, where ‘personal theories’ or ‘leading ideas’ are somewhat tested on the basis of contextual sense making. However, it could also be seen as akin to ‘reflection-before-action’ (Greenwood, 1993), where practice is constructed before and beyond its happening. As stated, however, such practice can only be fashioned from conscious and insightful acts of observation, and interpretation of those observations as opposed to mere experience per se.

The examples provided below from Breivik’s coaching bring to life such concepts;

The coaches and players file into a meeting, before an intended practice. The players looked tired, they have done so for a couple of days. Breivik speaks; “*ok [pause as she scans the room]...think about two aspects of your game that you are happy with, and one you want to improve. Try to visualize each scenario, work on this in the way we’ve spoken about...[another pause as she looks around the room again] but right now... I think you should relax or just go shopping!*” Surprised smiles emanate from everyone (field note).

The coaches are concerned about one of the girls. She’s very disciplined, but seems constantly tired, although she insists she’s fine. The physiotherapist joins her for a morning jog. On returning, she’s smiling, happy. She rushes to tell me they “*saw a fox*”. I later learn that the coaches had decided she should run in the woods to “*rediscover the joy of exercise*”; to “*go back to nature*”. She needed to be taken away from her obsession

with set fitness times and goals; she “*had to stop thinking of her body as a machine*” (Field note).

Here, Breivik had paid attention and read the context in a way that reinvigorated the athlete. In this way, individuals’ needs were identified and addressed to the benefit of all.

### **Reflective conclusion**

Despite the argument having been made over the past two decades that competence in coaching comprises much more than merely applying sport science or of refining technique, the contention for coaching as involving situationally prudent judgements has still to be consensually accepted. Hence, while attention continues to be paid to such techne grounded topics as ‘technology enhanced coach education’, ‘mental toughness’, and unproblematic notions of athlete ‘empowerment’ (see UK Coaching’s ‘Applied Coaching Research Conference’, 2019), the appreciation of coaching as an emergent, contextual yet historically based act, remains underappreciated. Alternatively, in line with phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001), the goal of this paper was to further the case for coaching as work that demands careful and insightful thought about constructive practice. In this age of audit, self-surveillance and quantitative data, the purpose has been to bring the astute, craft know-how of coaching back to centre stage. Such phronetic actions relate to the how of coaching being appropriately related to the intentionality of the practice.

What we are essentially arguing for here is greater recognition of intellectual (prudent, judicious) work by coaches, thus conceptualising coaching as a cerebral as opposed to a technical activity. Phronesis, and its associated meaning of practical wisdom, has been subsequently offered as a framework through which to realise such a perspective. This is not only in terms of an abstract conceptualisation, but also by providing concrete examples of how

such a discernment can look in practice. Equally, lest we be misunderstood here, the purpose has not been to prescribe tight recommendations for coaching behaviour, or even a particular aspect of that behaviour. Those who coach, and critically study coaching, know that the activity cannot be so reduced. Rather, the goal has been to advocate or provide a ‘theoretical orientation’ (Becker, 1982) in relation to what phronetic thinking can bring to coaching. It is an orientation tentatively illustrated by empirical examples thus going further than just explanatory rhetoric; a case of showing or suggesting as opposed to telling. Similar to the recent work of Jones (2019), the intention has been to both offer an alternative framework for understanding the coaching world, allied to provisional evocations “for how to improve [that] world” (Puddephat et al. (2009, p. 13-14). Finally, the paper also marked an effort to expand existing phronetic concepts, such as possessing an historical appreciation, paying attention to minutiae, and considered ethical behavior, to other, albeit related ideas, such as emergent practice and viewing the coach as a contextual literate. In doing so, an attempt was made to more authentically develop the idea of the coach as a ‘competent’, ‘practically wise’ actor.

Note<sup>1</sup>. The data cited within this paper emanated from an in depth ethnography where the [second] author spent 18 months embedded within an elite handball context (the aforementioned LKS). Here, the Head Coach, Marit Breivik, inherited a high performance system similar to others in international sport; one dominated by metrics and explicit expressions of control. It was, however, one she wanted to change to better reflect constructivist pedagogical principles. By the time she left, the LKS had become the most successful women’s international handball team in recent history, with both players and coach(es) being awarded several national and international accolades. The precise methods of data collection within the study included field notes from observations, and semi structured interviews. The interviews in this regard more nearly resembled “casual conversations” whilst holding to an ‘implicit research

agenda” (Fetterman, 1989, p.48). They were also linked to the observations, thus allowing opportunities for further probing and clarification. Utilising such sources allowed an ‘intense field study’ (Andersen, 1995) to deconstruct and understand the complex social phenomenon in question (Flyvbjerg, 2004). The aim was to capture the significance attached to contextual interactions, language, and beliefs (Angrosino 2007) as related to principles of phronesis. For a more in-depth description and explanation of the precise method(s) used in this study, see Hemmestad and Jones [2017]).

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