

## Commentary

Firstly, I'd like to thank the author and journal editor, Simon Jenkins, for an opportunity to comment on his published piece 'Beyond crude pragmatism in sports coaching: Insights from C.S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey'. In responding, somewhat in the spirit of the original article itself, I allowed myself some pragmatic leeway; some room to drift from traditional confines of direct retort, and lightly touch upon some selected concepts mentioned. In doing so, rather than opposing the objective of the exercise, I felt I was somewhat contributing to it. This was because 'Beyond crude pragmatism' follows a rather loose thread of argument itself, meandering from classic pragmatism, to an interpretation of the football coach Arsène Wenger's practice, to mixed research methods, to reflection and the work of Donald Schön [1], and back again.

The first point which drew attention was the mention given to coaches' philosophies; both Cushion and Partington's [2] assertion that coaches struggle to identify what is meant when a question regarding their own philosophy is posed, and Huber's [3] assertive definition of a philosophy. A coaching philosophy, or rather having one, has traditionally been embedded in coaches' learning and coach education as something coaches should have and know; as a definitive compass or guide to practice. As a researcher and coach I've increasingly come to question both the value of trying to clearly articulate one's philosophy (or to claim a philosophy as one's own), and what it means to do so. This is because what coaches do and really reflect on is practice. Now this is not to say that coaches practice without careful consideration to the objectives, progression and consequences of that practice, but that any thought regarding it comes not in advance (i.e., 'I philosophise, therefore, I do'). Rather, such consideration is interlinked and unfolds within the practice, and in making retrospective sense of that practice. An articulation of any philosophy then, if it is to avoid the proverbial wish-list, can only come as a justification of practice. This naturally calls into question the relevance of getting coaches to articulate their respective 'philosophies'. Better, in my mind, to get them to justify practice, and examine any abstract inference from there.

A second point worthy of musing within the article was that of the so-called 'Pragmatic temperament'. Here, I found Burke's [4] nautical metaphor rather ironic. In stating that a ship's compass needs to be flexible and to 'move freely on a pivot', yet be subject to the independent realities of the world's gravitational and magnetic fields, provides a rather

obvious contradiction. The argument of 'be flexible when you need to be, but only when you need to be' doesn't help anyone too much. Any practitioner or student would be within his or her rights to demand more insightful guidance here. If the compass is always obeyed, where's the pragmatism in that? While if it is sometimes not, an inevitable question asked would be 'what are the conditions and contextual factors that may create such a situation?'

Furthermore, as argued elsewhere [5] such situations or events have to be temporally located; that is, in an appreciation that there is no present without a past. This, of course, is not to take the argument for pragmatic flexibility (defined as a 'flexible attitude of mind' or 'attitude of orientation' within Jenkins's paper) to its logical end point; to some kind of anything goes relative fudge. It's a position I've tried to clarify in recent work (e.g., [5] & [6]) to counter criticism of having portrayed coaching as unmanageable complexity. Perhaps then, this is a point to be addressed in future when scholars claim a pragmatic approach; that is, how pragmatic is or should be a pragmatic practitioner. Finally here, a rather argumentative character intent on finding flaws in the evident philosophic case making (!) may question that if the pragmatic approach is adopted across the board, then where's the pragmatism in that? Consequently, the case for pragmatism clearly needs some deconstruction, and reconstruction.

Having followed, admired and been somewhat frustrated by Arsène Wenger's career at Arsenal Football Club, I found the link between his practice and pragmatism interesting to say the least. If I were ever asked to name the least pragmatic football coaches I know of, I would say, Guardiola and Wenger. Why? Not because of what they say (or have said), but on the evidence of what they do. Their teams are very (if not instantly) recognisable in terms of how they play; both coaches have certain beliefs about the game and appear quite reluctant to abandon them; the antithesis of pragmatism? Hence, the argument made that Wenger was and is pragmatic was difficult to understand and follow. Similarly, claiming someone is 'pragmatic with ideals' again helps little in terms of understanding here. This is not to say that structure and contingency can't exist together; rather that a nuanced exploration of these dilemmas and tension is needed to understand better the whys and wherefores, the underlying causes and reasons of action. What is required is greater criticality in terms of sense making; not to merely accept coaches' words and actions per se, but to delve, question and query in the quest for meaning. Wenger a pragmatist? More of an idealist or purist in my book.

A fourth point worth considering within 'Beyond pragmatism' relates to the case for mixed methods as some manifestation of pragmatism in (doing) research (and here I embark on some self-critique). Although some would consider it a point of semantics, the authors cited in making the case (e.g., [7], of which I was a co-author), although claiming to do so, don't really engage in any authentic form of mixed methodological study. For example, in following systematic observation with interviewing what we undertook [7] was the use of multiple consecutive methods, not mixed or the mixing of methods in the classical sense. Why does this matter? It matters as it goes to the core of grounding research in a particular ontology and related epistemology (which, in theory, should lead to a particular methodology). However, by rather naively following an objective data collection method (i.e., systematic observation) with an interpretive, subjective one (i.e., interviews) naturally creates an epistemological misalignment. This is not say that counter arguments for mixed methodologies exist, but these were not [7], [8] and currently are not being engaged with thus diluting the value and quality of the work. Hence, it is an area and issue which requires greater critical rigour if it is to be used or claimed within coaching related research.

Although this commentary may appear an overly critical response at first glance, it is not meant to be so interpreted. There are plenty of ideas within the original submission from Simon which I agree with and have similarly advocated; for example, that of fallibilism as an idea for coaches to think with, in addition to Dewey's notion of 'future- orientated thinking'. Indeed, both notions are currently examined and discussed with students on our newly launched Doctorate of Sports Coaching at Cardiff Met where the backwards (reflective) and forwards (inferential) nature of coaches' thinking are de- and re-constructed. Rather, in the spirit of generating further debate from this thought provoking piece, I have chosen to focus on some concepts which need further examination and comprehension, otherwise they remain at the level of the abstract. The general call then is to take care with the phrases and language we use in terms of what they more clearly mean (e.g., being pragmatic). To think through to a greater degree the observations recorded and the words transcribed in order to extrapolate hidden meanings in the discourse; to not just accept, but in the tradition of critical sociology, to question the taken for granted and make the familiar strange. Only then can we engage with any theory at the level of criticality required, not as decoration but as authentic explanatory and guiding concepts.

- [1] Schön, D. A. The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action, New York: Basic Books. 1983
- [2] Cushion C and Partington M. A critical analysis of the conceptualisation of ‘coaching philosophy. Sport, Education and Society, 2016; 21:6, 851-867.
- [3] Huber J. Educational psychology in coaching athletes. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2013.
- [4] Burke FT. On what pragmatism was.  
<http://www.philosophy.uncc.edu/mleldrid/ACPW/Burke.pdf>
- [5] Jones, R.L. and Thomas, G. Ll. Coaching as ‘scaffolded’ practice: Further insights into sport pedagogy. Sports Coaching Review, 2015; 4(2), 65-79
- [6] Jones, R.L., Edwards, C. & Viotto Filho, I.A.T. Activity theory, complexity and sports coaching: An epistemology for a discipline. Sport, Education and Society, 2016; 21(2), 200-216.
- [7] Potrac, P, Jones, R and Armour, K. ‘It’s all about getting respect’: The Coaching behaviors of an expert English soccer coach. Sport, Education and Society, 2002; 7(2):183-202.
- [8] Smith, M. and Cushion CJ. An investigation of the in-game behaviours of professional, top-level youth soccer coaches. Journal of Sports Sciences 2006; 24(4): 355-366.