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Beyond 'Crude Pragmatism' in Sports Coaching:
Insights from C.S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey

Commentary Piece

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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago the head coach of a professional football club phoned me to seek advice about an obscure performance related matter. "Because I'd do anything to win a game of football" he said. A prolonged silence at my end of the line must have ensued, before he sheepishly added "Well, you know, not *anything!*". This relates to what Simon Jenkins referred to in his article as crude or everyday pragmatism [1], encompassing a potential overemphasis upon pursuing whatever seems likely to work in securing results [2], without necessarily being mindful of, or in some cases perhaps even caring about, the practical consequences of our ideas and actions, as is advocated by classical pragmatism [3].

For instance, Jose Mourinho, who is often referred to as a pragmatic coach, rejected criticism of his team's tactical style as dull and uninspiring, stating "Look, we're not entertaining? I don't care; we win". [4, p. 335]. Such pragmatism is commonly contrasted with idealism, whereby the coach seems to be more defined by their underpinning beliefs and values in action. For example, in referring to Pep Guardiola's high risk offensive strategies adopted during a Champions League semi-final match, Thierry Henry expressed that "Pep would rather die going forwards than stay alive defending" [5].

But the complexity of coaching precludes clearly defined dichotomies. Hence, Mourinho also implies a principled philosophical aestheticism in explaining: "For me flair is a team that defends fantastically well" [6], while Guardiola's brave idealism has not precluded extraordinary outcomes in terms of overall win percentage, and trophy hauls [7]. Moreover, some coaches can appear to embody elements of both simultaneously. Johan Cruyff articulated: "Professional football means money. It means achievement. Idealism of course means loving beautiful football. And it means never in your life making concessions about one or the other. They are equally important" [8]. To paraphrase Biesta's work [9], that Jenkins refers to [1], coaching is (or ought to be) a moral practice incorporating not only what works but also what is desirable. Notwithstanding, coaches are perhaps likely to adopt a somewhat more pragmatic or idealistic stance depending upon altering circumstances, and their evolving beliefs. It is here that I believe classical pragmatism, and particularly the work of C S Peirce, holds promise to take us beyond crude pragmatism, and help to frame a more nuanced view of how coaches become and adapt over time in a balanced response to the complex demands of coaching.

THE UTILITY OF PEIRCE'S ABDUCTIVE REASONING

Of late I have been researching the long term developmental journeys of performance coaches, from a range of sports, as they progress towards expertise. In regards to this study, Peirce's ideas on abductive reasoning have had great utility for me in inferring from a limited number of richly detailed specific coaching life history/life course cases to suggest the plausibility of tentative explanatory ideas generated [10] about general expertise development in coaching. Thomas, in arguing that abduction (whereby looser explanatory ideas are formed from the examination of local circumstances) offers a legitimate means to infer from case study data because of exemplary knowledge uncovered, states "Abduction... [provides] heuristics — ways of analyzing complexity that may not provide watertight guarantees of success in providing for explanation or predication but are unpretentious in their assumptions of fallibility and provisionality" [11, p. 577].

According to Peirce abduction is a stage of inquiry in which we attempt to generate theories-on-probation, which could turn out to be flawed, but can be tested later [12]. Abduction begins with the observation of surprising facts which require a sense making conceptual explanation that is logically functional, and therefore conceivable, in accounting for behaviours rather than being causally predictive [13]. Hence, while abduction does not necessarily deliver generalised full proof explanations, or water tight predictive guiding models, it does offer seemingly plausible rules of thumb, derived from the particular contextual experiences of others, which might be personally interpreted in relation to our own experiences, and thereby may possibly connect to our own phronesis [11]. In this way we may apprehend a storied appreciation of others realities, which may be accessible and relevant in relation to our own [11, 14, 15].

Thus, I have been able to extrapolate from meaningful contextualised local observations [13] to hypothesise about newly constructed broader notions, by making analogies with things already known in other domains [16], and comparisons with at first seemingly unrelated activities (such as the sport of surfing, Selye's work on adaptation to stress [17], and Bourdieu's concept of habitus [18]). Peirce referred to "association by resemblance" [19, p. 114], and cautioned: "Nothing unknown can ever become known except through its analogy with other things known. Therefore, do not attempt to explain phenomena isolated and disconnected from common experience" [20, p. 64]. One could regard this as a generative reasoning process, based on observed data, and well educated conjecture, alongside already known facts, as a crucial preliminary stage in the theory building logic of discovery [21]. The resultant suggestions about the ongoing (re)development of expert-like coaches¹ consequently feature a verisimilitude, both for myself and my participants, and potentially others, and, therefore, an apparent pursuitworthiness of explanatory propositions [10] that may be assessed, validated, and developed subsequently [21]. That is, they are not what must be, or what is, but what might be [22], as suggested by the research undertaken. As Peirce claims "Abduction is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea" [21].

¹ Those more towards the expert end of a conceived novice-expert developmental continuum.

But, what strikes me is that Peirce's notion of abductive reasoning could extend beyond inferring from research findings, to additionally help make sense of the process that expert-like coaches themselves employ in order to adapt and evolve in response to what one of my participants described as "An engagement with a constantly changing game that demands constant learning to promote success". That is, such coaches must balance carefully what is at stake, and constantly strive to do things differently and improve, in order to stay ahead of the pack. For example, one running coach explained to me how he is compelled to weigh up carefully the cost-benefit analysis of potential marginal gains, and to evaluate where best to invest his coaching efforts with which particular athletes. Another participant indicated that he habitually works his way through many developmental cycles concerning diverse coaching related matters, engendering an unsettling of old beliefs, or a reformation of ideas. While this can occasionally lead to distraction, straying down a wrong path, or even exhaustion, the process is usually a progressive one, identifying anchor points or stakes in the ground to attempt to control the uncertainty of coaching, and situating learning and practice in areas that might most need attending to in order to stimulate further improvement. He claimed that "There is no discovery without exploration". This fine tuning and alteration to synch with the world around us, as a consequence of learning from ongoing experimentation², and our own fallibility, connects well with Peirce's abduction as part of a logic of discovery [24], and with the more recent conception of learning as dwelling [25]. From this latter perspective as we progressively interweave and attune our embodied practices with the world, rather than simply a transformation in our thinking, a transformed sense of self is implicated [25]. We and the world not only become, but each has the potential to transform the other [25], in an iterative developmental process of evolution.

PEIRCE'S AGAPASTIC THEORY OF EVOLUTION

Peirce proposed three modes of evolution – by chance variation, mechanical necessity, and creative love [26] (agapism is a selfless other directed spiritual love [27]). Peirce believed in a middle path, between the extremes of a disorganised randomness, and rigid mechanisation, with love being central to a self-perpetuating process of growth [28]. Elcombe argued that agapastic coaching, based on Peirce's evolution through creative love, could be helpful in considering the development of athletes [28], while I would seek to extend the usefulness of these ideas more directly to considering the development of coaches.

If we return our attention to the tenet of classical pragmatism that truth should be judged by the practical consequences of our beliefs [29], then philosophical pragmatism may therefore promote thought to guide action [30] as we seek balanced ways to evolve our coaching, and our evolution as coaches, in response to an ever changing world. One anchor point to cope with such conditions of unpredictability is the establishment of a coaching philosophy [28]. However, this would not be entirely fixed, but would require a reflexive critical re-examination and reconstruction of beliefs and values, in response to formative experiences

² Bereiter and Scadamalia claimed that experts in creative fields are compelled to make judgements about the *promisingness* of potential developmental directions [23].

and learning, reflecting an adaptation of the self [28]. This links to the notion of learning as becoming [31] (itself a fusion of social participation and Deweyan embodied construction perspectives [32]), and what Goodson and Adair termed reselfing [33].

And so, our evolution as coaches, while it may be affected by luck, and constituted partly by the order of accumulated habit, and partly by the creativity of invention [28], may be regarded as critically defined by the relative balance between the two. For instance, our habitus (our embodied history as a result of our experiences) must not negate our spirit of experimentation (fuelled by a love of our subject, and those in our charge) [28]. To this end we must be guided by both scientific theory and our practical wisdom, and the greatest dangers for coaches are to become fossilised in the same way of doing things, or to become indifferent to the consequence of our actions.

Hence we are required to cultivate what I have come to regard as a *developmental habitus* – an embodied disposition to our own ongoing growth that leads us to be immersed in practice, and committed to, and personally invested in, further learning, because of our love for what we do, and because it will benefit our athletes (though I am not blind to the possibility that some coaches will be motivated more by an aggrandisement of the coaching self). Peirce believed that our experiences in the world, including those arising from our fallibilism, should shape our goals, and possibilities for inquiry [12]. Here I am reminded of Dominicé’s notion of *formation* - a blending of experiences that sculpturally shapes a life [34]. Inherent in Peirce’s conceptions is a process of trial and error in order to get better [28], implicating that only through having the courage to risk failure can coaches truly embrace the full possibilities of growth. As poet Piet Hein expressed: “The road to wisdom? Well, it’s plain and simple to express: Err and err and err again, but less and less and less” [35, p. 751]

The latest incarnation of my *Learning From Legendary Coaches* project, is based upon a hundred year plus direct lineage of interrelated coaching influences in football, featuring Jack Reynolds, Rinus Michels, Johan Cruyff and Pep Guardiola. In resonance with the Peircian spirit these coaches successively came to love what they did, inspired others through their coaching, used their own accumulated histories, and grasped opportunities to learn further through experimentation, and in so doing affected the evolution of football, and the evolution of themselves. Their stories feature risk, revision and reinvigoration, built in part on inherited foundations from an intergenerational community of inquiry (Peirce emphasised the importance of community in the development of the individual [36]), in constantly striving for improvement and seeking a sense of a rightness of direction³. This project, and my aforementioned research into the long term developmental journeys towards expertise of performance coaches, might be taken to represent attempts at the empirical philosophical enquiry that Cushion and Partington called for [2] (albeit that the former relies upon secondary rather than primary data), given that they investigate the formative influences

³ Consequently, when Guardiola was interviewed by Noel Gallagher shortly after his appointment at Manchester City, and was asked what he wanted his legacy to be after he eventually leaves, he insisted that he did not know what that legacy might be, but that he was coming to this coaching post in order to learn and adapt [37].

upon, the development and redevelopment of, and the expression and consequences in action of, coach's evolving philosophies over extended periods of time.

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