Philosophy and Reflection of an Aspiring High School Head Field Hockey Coach

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My mom signed me up for YMCA soccer at the age of 6, and it was then that I realized that I liked sports, and I was good at sports. In seventh and eighth grade, there was no Physical Education class, and instead we had to be on an athletic team for three seasons. I chose to participate in field hockey, basketball, and lacrosse, and I continued to play those three sports in high school, competing on the Varsity teams for all four years. I went on to play Division III field hockey at Haverford College, and after graduating with a degree in Biology, I knew that going to medical school or working in a lab was not for me.

I had worked at field hockey and lacrosse camps in my summers between my college years, and I knew that education, both on the field/court and in the classroom, was going to be my career path. I got a job as a middle school science teacher at a private PK-12 school, which happened to be my alma mater, and I currently coach the freshmen field hockey team, the junior varsity basketball team, and the middle school lacrosse team. My current position aligns perfectly with my passions for both science and sports, and in my fourth year in this role, I am ready to take my coaching to the next level.

In my first year of coaching, the idea of being a head coach of a high school program overwhelmed me. Now, however, after three years of experience, my goal is to become a high school field hockey head coach. I currently have a team of ten girls, mostly freshmen that are generally playing to fulfill a sports requirement. They work hard, and I enjoy coaching them, but I'm ready to move to the next level. Developing a coaching philosophy, a concept map, and an understanding of reflective practice are some of the necessary steps to reach that dream job of being in charge of a successful program.

Coaching Philosophy

In my senior year of high school, I took a Psychology course, and I can remember a particular exercise where we were given a list of core values and had to rank them in order of importance to us. Some of the options included Wisdom, Spirituality, Family, Money, Health, etc… This was the first time where I had to think introspectively about what truly mattered most to me. While many of the choices were of importance to my beliefs and core values, the one value that I ranked above all others was Happiness. When I am playing a sport, I am happy. When I am teaching in the classroom, I am happy. When I see someone else smile or experience joy, I am happy. My coaching philosophy reflects not only what brings me happiness, but also how I can instill happiness in others.

My coaching philosophy is summarized in *Figure 1*. At the core of the philosophy is Education. Being an educator gives me happiness, which is why it is the point of emphasis in my coaching philosophy. As a coach, we are responsible for educating our athletes, both on and off the field. On the field, my goal is to teach my athletes how to play the game, which includes ongoing fundamentals and acquiring of new skills along the way. In addition to individual skill development, I also want to provide an education of game sense and strategy. I want my athletes to understand how to make decisions on the field and why they should be in particular positions at certain times. Finally, on the field, I want to give them a sense of how to appropriately stay healthy and fit. Off of the field, there are also important skills that I want to instill in my athletes. There are certain life skills, like effective communication, how to be a "good" person, and leadership skills that can develop not only well-rounded athletes, but also well-rounded human beings. Most of this life skills education, for me, is not explicit, but rather taught by example. These are busy student athletes, and as I have been a student athlete myself, I also want my

athletes to know how to effectively have time management in their demanding lives. Finally, I want them to understand strategies for growth mindset, and believe that if they work hard (in any aspect of their lives, not just athletics), they can improve.

While the core of my philosophy is Education, there are two additional factors that supplement successful education. The first is Enjoyment, which ties into my primary core value of Happiness. I believe that in order to have effective education, there has to be a level of enjoyment. While I acknowledge that every individual is not going to experience enjoyment one hundred percent of the time, my goal is for every player to have a general sense of happiness surrounding my program. If there is no enjoyment, there will not be education. The other aspect that supplements successful education is Connection. This includes both the connection between the players and the coach and connection between players and players. It is important that a coach develops relationships with each of their players and gets a sense of who they are and what motivates them. A coach must also provide opportunities for team bonding. While acknowledging that not every team member is going to be "best friends" with each other, there must be a sense of camaraderie for successful education to occur.

My own core value of Happiness is tied in throughout my coaching philosophy. Being an educator makes me happy and spreads happiness to others. Having my athletes learn skills, both on and off the field, should lead to success in games and in their lives, which ultimately will bring happiness. By having Enjoyment and Connection supplement Education, the teaching will be enhanced and effective. In order to achieve my goal of becoming a head high school field hockey coach, it will be important to continue to develop my coaching philosophy as more knowledge and experience are acquired.

Coaching Concept Map

Question: *How will I learn the skills and knowledge to become a high school head field hockey coach?*
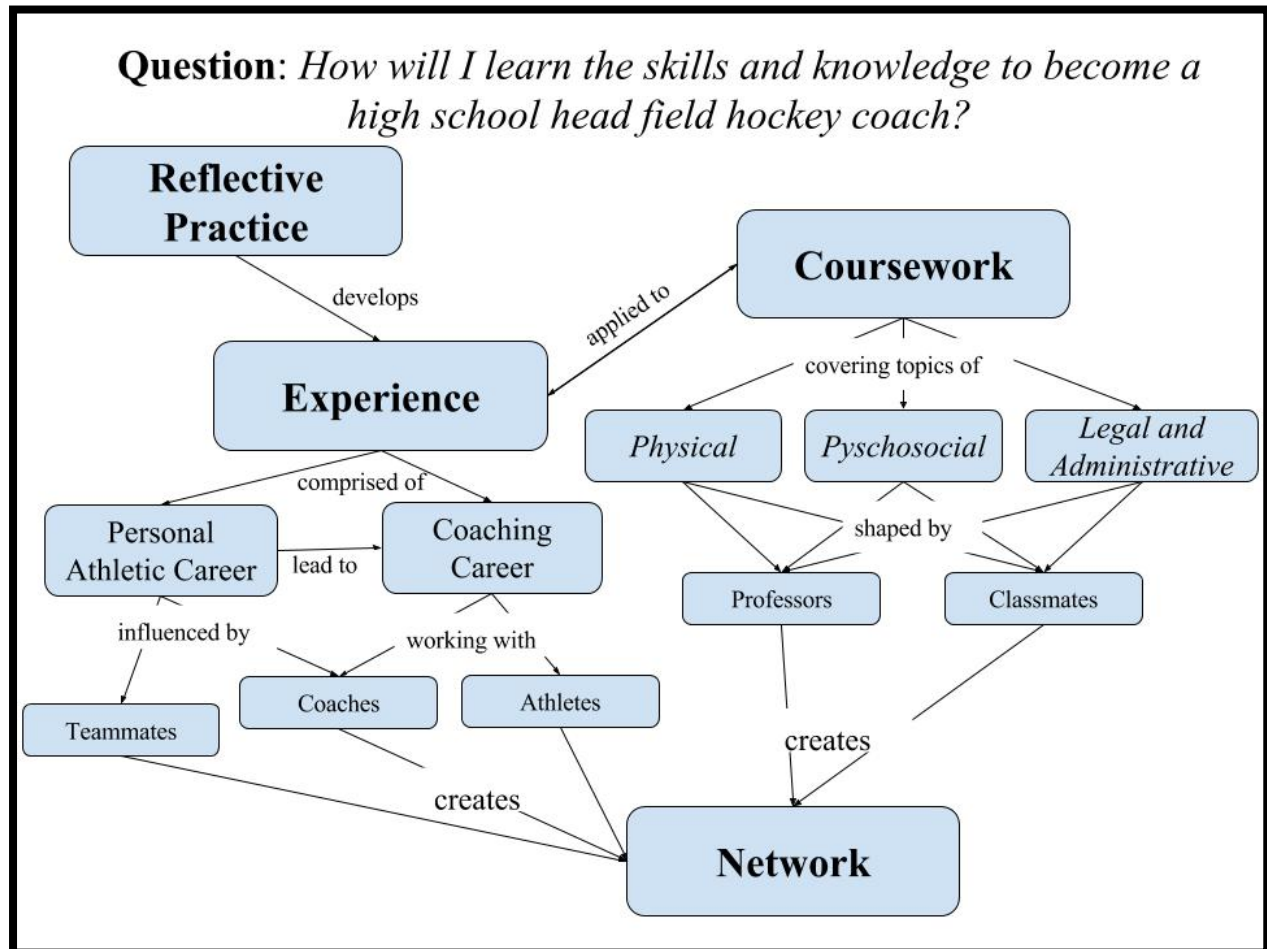

Figure 2. Coaching Concept Map. One of the key concepts that will help me learn the skills and knowledge to become a head field hockey coach is my past experience, both as an athlete and as a coach. If I can then use my experience and apply it to my coursework, in addition to applying my coursework to my experience, I can further enhance my knowledge and skills. The coursework will allow me to dive deeper into areas that have not necessarily been covered in my experience. Engaging in reflective practice will shape my experience, and it will help me develop even more as a coach. The people that I encounter along my learning journey, both in my experience and in my coursework, will help me to create a network that will support me as I go along the path of pursuing a job as a high school field hockey head coach.

Reflective Practice Comprehension

It is important to understand that "the simple accumulation of experience is not sufficient" (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999) to become a successful coach. Reflective practice is a way to bridge the gap between experience and knowledge. The first principle of reflective practice, as outlined by Donald Schön (1983), is for the coach to understand his or her "role." They must explicitly think about their priorities and responsibilities as a coach. For example, a middle school assistant coach plays a very different role from a head varsity high school coach. While the middle school assistant coach may have the role of implementing the practice plan set forth by the head coach and making practice "fun," the head varsity coach is responsible for the development of the program and probably places greater emphasis on success in competitions.

The next principle of reflective practice is "problem setting." When the coach is faced with a situation, they must bring their prior knowledge to "recognize familiar aspects" (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999), but this circumstance should be treated as a brand new, complex problem. Problem setting requires the coach to assess the situation, bringing in their past experiences, but also creating new strategies and solutions to add to their knowledge database. Perhaps a coach has had issues with captain leadership in the past, but if the coach encounters a similar problem again, they must remember that these individuals are unique and the solution to the problem might be slightly different.

The third principle occurs when the coach experiments with different strategies and solutions until the problem is resolved. The process of creating a strategy, implementing the solution, and evaluating the results is cycled through until an effective resolution happens. In the captain leadership example, perhaps the coach's initial approach is to have a meeting with the captains to discuss the frustrations with the leadership. The coach may inform the captains that

they are not leading effectively and the team does not seem to be responding. After the meeting, the situation still is not resolved and the team is still not respecting the leadership of the captains. The coach may then evaluate the situation to realize that perhaps the problem is not with the captains, but rather with the team. They might develop and implement a new strategy to have a "team bonding day" to play various games and exercises in order to foster team building. Through the process of experimenting with different strategies, the coach may find that the problem is not with the captains themselves, but it was actually a situation involving lack of team cohesion.

Finally, the fourth principle involves thinking about situations carefully without having a direct consequence of actions. Schön refers to this as the creation of "virtual worlds" (1983). When a coach considers a thought vigilantly, without necessarily acting on the thought, they are essentially creating a "virtual" situation in their heads (or perhaps on paper). For example, when designing a practice, a coach might put themselves in the minds of their players. Maybe at first the drill was designed to involve passing around a grid of cones for a certain amount of time, trying to focus on strong and accurate passes. After putting themselves in the minds of the players, they might realize that this would be a bit boring for the athletes. Because of the creation of the "virtual" situation, the coach may decide to add a competitive aspect to the drill, making the drill a bit less "boring." By considering the situation thoughtfully before implementation, the coach avoids the consequence of lack of player motivation due to the dullness of the drill.

Engaging in reflective practice gives the coach the ability to make the connection between experience and knowledge. Instead of having experiences and knowledge in isolation, by framing their roles, engaging in problem setting, experimenting to create solutions, and creating virtual worlds, a coach can bridge that gap and become a more effective leader.

References

Gilbert, W., & Trudel, P. (1999). Framing the construction of coaching knowledge in
experiential learning theory. *Sociology Of Sport Online*.

Schön, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* New York:
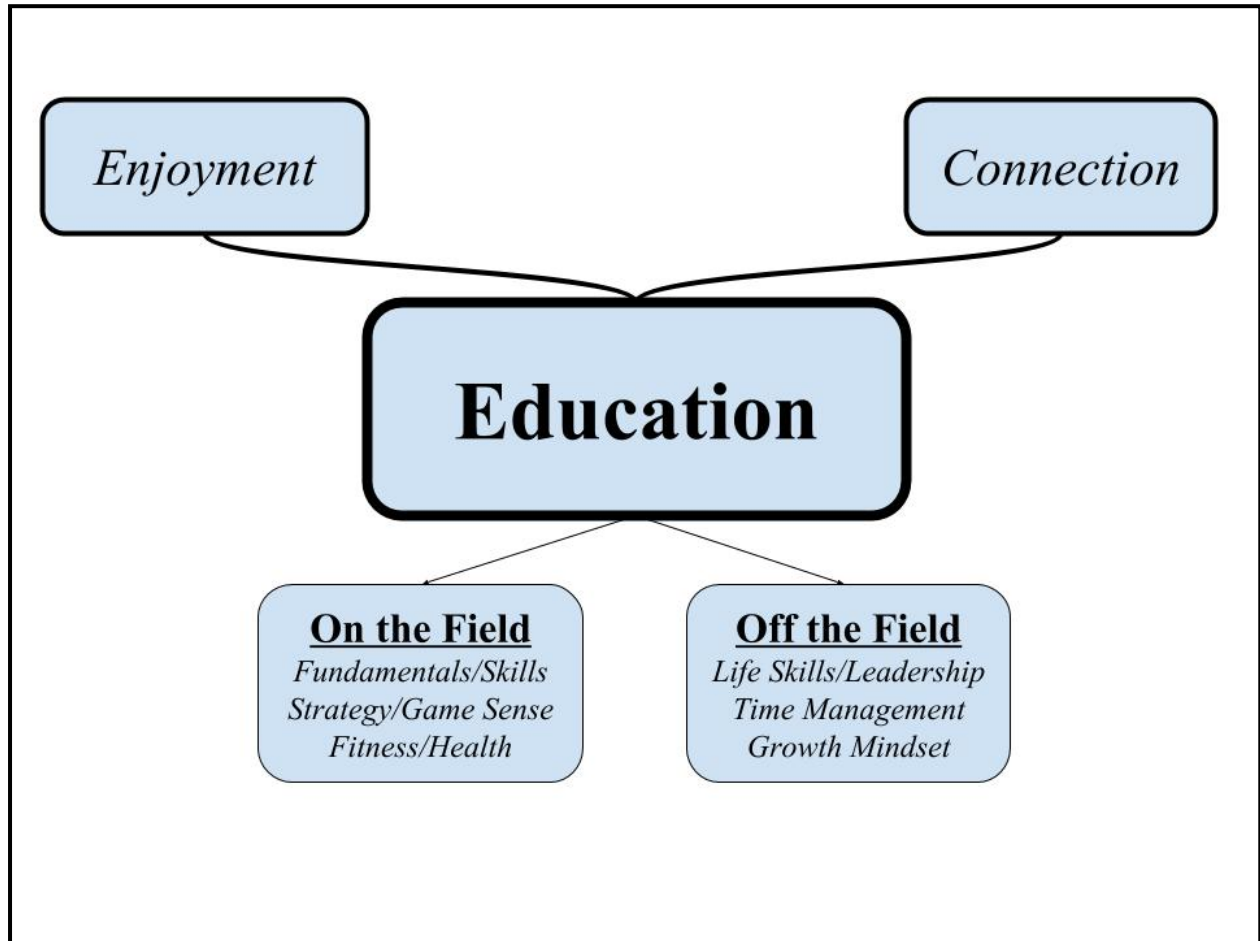Basic Books.

Figures

Figure 1. My Coaching Philosophy. At the core is Education, which is important for both development of the athlete on and off the playing field. Enjoyment and Connection are two values that supplement effective education.