

Bridging the Gap: What Strength and Conditioning can learn from Sport Coaching

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One of the ways for any discipline to develop is to look to the work, practices, knowledge bases and lessons learned from other disciplines who have trodden similar paths before us, preferable those more closely related (Lyle, 2018).

Sport coaching is also battling with the translation of applying research findings into practice. Arguments abound with blame being apportioned to the coaches, who are seen to be insular, uncritical and may hold an anti-intellectual mindset (Abraham, Muir & Morgan, 2010). Other researchers consider the role of coach education and its lack of engagement with the empirical literature (Cushion & Lyle, 2010; Abraham & Collins, 2011). Finally, but not least, blame is also attributed to the issues of the research and researchers themselves (Lyle, 2018).

While coaches work in an environment where they can continue to practice without any recourse to stay up to date with the latest findings or develop their knowledge bases on a regular basis, it is easy for many S&C coaches to continue with their current practices and approaches. Requirements for licence to practice and a greater possibility for litigation mean that evidence-based practice (EBP) is more easily upheld in

medical and health professions. This means socio-political factors, common practice expectations and traditions, as well as a personal motivation are critical components to driving what happens in EBP and must be attended to in the long-term by policy makers and governing bodies.

Sport coach education has been criticised extensively for its lack of engagement with the academic literature (Lyle, 2018). This criticism is less appropriate for S&C education, certainly in the UK, with UKSCA having extensive links to research and Higher Education programmes, which also run a number of education programmes at undergraduate and post graduate levels. However, whilst there is a clear link and engagement with empirical research, much of this research covers the 'what' of S&C coaching practice for example intensity and volume prescriptions, programme designs, velocity-based training parameters; there is little if any consideration of the 'how' this training maybe delivered and even the 'why' (Anderson, 2018). Anderson (2018) found that only 20% of the advertised content of Masters Programmes in S&C in the UK contained any pedagogical content, i.e. *how* to coach S&C. It is little wonder then that this area of S&C practice is continually

neglected. How practitioners *use* coach education must also be considered as it varies; Collins, Abraham & Collins (2012) categorised users as either '*vampires*', who are self-confident and believe themselves to be superior to others, or '*wolves*', who emphasize collaboration and constant knowledge assimilation. Can we provide evidence-based practice ideas to satisfy both?

Finally, and possibly the largest cause of the '*gap*' is the research conducted in the field of S&C. Researchers tend to view academic knowledge as *superior* to experiential knowledge, and that knowledge is a one-way didactic process (Lyle, 2018). Thus, when S&C coaches fail to use the findings in the empirical literature, researchers firmly focus the blame on the practitioner. But who is *actually* responsible for knowledge transfer?

It must also be noted at this point that not all research is intended or should be intended for the S&C coach. Theory building helps structure our understanding and scaffold future practices, and is the essential foundation of Strength & Conditioning both as an applied professional practice and as an academic field of study.

In order for the empirical literature to gain traction, the research must resonate with S&C coaches' experiences, practices and context (Anderson, 2016; Lyle, 2018). Eraut (1994) points out that the researcher is not the '*centre of the world*' within a professional practice, and that in some professional fields, researchers are confined to the role of dissemination, evaluation and *post hoc* construction of theoretical rationale (p.54). Therefore, a greater focus on the coach and related

stakeholders, their needs, priorities, ambitions and how this can be researched and disseminated through a '*knowledge transfer framework*' is needed (Holt et al., 2018).

Due to S&C's strong historical links to sport science and reductionist methodologies, much research is conducted using randomised and controlled trials and other similar reductionist approaches, to demonstrate the impact of interventions. While this can clearly demonstrate the efficacy of certain approaches, it fails to deliver to the S&C coach, *what works best*? One solution to this would be for research interventions to compare the *new intervention* against *current best practices*. Another critical issue that can cause a lack of uptake by the professional field also links to this process of reduction, whereby research fails to unpick the '*untidy*' reality of practice by sticking to discipline-influenced, single disciplinary approaches (North, 2017; Lyle, 2018). Anderson's (2016) S&C Coaching Framework identifies the knowledge and skill bases that S&C coaches must use within their practices. This framework identifies both the inter-disciplinarily as well as the multi-disciplinarily nature of the work of an S&C coach. Current research methods in S&C are not capable of dealing with this level of complexity; however, North's (2017) use of *Critical Realism* does show promise as a metatheory capable of dealing with this level of complexity.

Finally, Williams and Kilgour (2014), from a teaching/education field, call for research that has (a) convincing findings, (b) resonance with teacher's professional day to day experiences, (c) translation into practical strategies and (d) wide dissemination through professional

networks. While Lyle (2018) suggests that journal editors should judge applied research on: *utility, availability, accessibility and transferability.*

So, who is responsible for bridging the gap? *We all are!* From practitioners, to researchers and educators; this is a *shared responsibility.*

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