

1 **Introduction**

2 The role of the Coach Developer (CD) has received increased scrutiny in recent
3 times due, in no small part, to the enhanced prominence in strategic sport policy which
4 has been evident both in the UK (Sport England, 2016) and internationally
5 (International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE), 2014). Such enhanced
6 prominence inevitably raises questions about how CDs learn to perform their role and
7 how institutions responsible for their education might support them most effectively.
8 For the purposes of this investigation, the term ‘CD’ follows the ICCE (2014) definition
9 to encompass all those with a responsibility for the development of coaches including
10 (depending on organizational rhetoric) tutors, coach educators, and mentors. The
11 importance of better understanding how CDs might be supported in their learning has
12 been highlighted by recent research. For example, one of the most extensive
13 investigations concerning CD learning conducted to date, revealed a disconcerting
14 paradox between the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the programme in
15 question, and the courses the CDs were subsequently charged to deliver. Specifically,
16 Culver et al.’s (2019) investigation featured 26 CDs who were attending a course in
17 order to learn how to deliver components of the Canadian Coaching Certification
18 Programme (CCCP). The CCCP is designed following constructivist principles, yet
19 Culver et al. (2019) found the CDs were exposed to an intensive and content-heavy
20 package of ‘training’ which allowed little room for, for example, exploration and
21 problem solving. Campbell et al. (2020) asserted such incongruity is common and that
22 CD ‘training’ programmes are often little more than direct instruction concerning how
23 to most efficiently deliver a prescribed curriculum. Having observed the delivery of a
24 formal coach education programme from the perspective of the three CDs, Stodter and
25 Cushion (2019) asserted that approaches to facilitating learning which fail to resolve

1 these underpinning theoretical paradoxes may contribute to shortcomings in CDs’
2 applied practice. In summary, research concerning CDs has demonstrated considerable
3 deficiencies in how these practitioners’ learning is supported. To date, research
4 concerning CD learning has not demonstrated how such shortcomings might be
5 resolved, although numerous authors have suggested that embracing a ‘Landscapes of
6 Practice’ (LoP) perspective might provide some insight and represent an appropriate
7 foundation on which to build future provision (Brasil et al., 2018; Culver et al., 2021;
8 Vinson et al., 2021).

9 In order to frame this investigation, we will first turn to a consideration of how
10 learning within a LoP perspective can be theorized as ‘identity work’, with a focus on
11 Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) social theory of learning. Specifically,
12 we explore identification as identity work through engagement, imagination and
13 alignment as principal concepts in better understanding these phenomena. We will then
14 consider how the framework of LoPs features additional concepts that are helpful in
15 better understanding how CD learning can be facilitated through mediated programmes.
16 The aim of this investigation is to offer new insights to better understand how CDs’
17 learning might be supported by exploring the concept of identification through
18 engagement, imagination and alignment in relation to a formal programme. To date,
19 these concepts have not been explicitly applied in this context and so this investigation
20 offers an original insight to enable those with a responsibility for facilitating CD
21 learning to understand how ‘identity work’ could provide a suitable lens through which
22 to review current and future provision.

23 *Theorising learning in Landscapes of Practice*

24 In order to appropriately place how learning is theorized in this investigation, it
25 is first necessary to outline the concept of LoPs and also how identity relates to

1 knowledgeability. LoPs are constituted by the many Communities of Practice (CoPs;
2 Wenger, 1998) and other groups which determine what represents competence within
3 an occupation. LoPs are likely to contain, for example, groups which are leading
4 practitioners, but also governing and regulatory bodies, unions, and researchers.
5 Through a dynamic and complex interaction, these groups determine whether ‘claims’
6 to competence are accepted as legitimate when considered against the occupation’s
7 ‘knowledgeability’ (E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). For example, a CD
8 in the UK seeking to demonstrate an expert claim to knowledgeability will require
9 thorough understanding of one or more National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs),
10 sports clubs, UK Coaching, HM Government policy (potentially enacted through UK
11 Sport and/or Sport England), UK Anti-Doping, the media as well as various disciplines
12 of academic research. The power and influence of these various groups is inherently
13 unequal, ever-shifting and beyond the capability of any one individual to master
14 completely (B. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). The individual must,
15 therefore, decide how to position themselves within the LoP (i.e., determine which
16 bodies are most important to them at that time and what elements of their practice they
17 will seek to develop). Such decisions represent the heart of how Wenger (1998) defines
18 identity – an individual, but socially dependent, concept. For the purpose of this
19 investigation, we adopted Wenger’s (1998, p. 150) descriptors of identity as:
20 “negotiated experience of self ..., [community] membership, learning trajectory, nexus
21 of multi membership, [and] belonging defined globally but experienced locally”.
22 Practically, these relational decisions influence what courses and qualifications a CD
23 might complete (and to what extent they engage), which podcasts to listen to, what
24 research they read and to which of their coaches they give the most support. It is at the

1 boundaries between these various bodies and practice at which learning happens
2 (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

3 A CD's positioning in the landscape will shift as they progress their careers and
4 pay attention to different elements; for example, they might work with different
5 organizations, engage with contemporary research and respond to new policies. E.
6 Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) describe the process of deciding which
7 elements of the LoP to pay attention to as a matter of identification which can be
8 conscious, subconscious, intentional or compelled and that learning can be considered
9 as "identity work" (E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021, p. 26). They describe
10 three modes of identification; engagement, imagination and alignment which are
11 theorized to be most effective when combined. Engagement is the most immediate
12 mode and relates to where we spend our time, to whom we talk and what resources we
13 use. For example, choosing to attend a particular conference or contributing to a
14 professional learning community, might reveal something about to what ideas, people
15 and concepts we are committed. Imagination relates to the images we construct of the
16 landscape which serves as a point of reference to how we might see ourselves. For
17 example, a CD might construct an image of their landscape based on speaking to
18 coaches and athletes working in the field, stories relayed through media sources, and
19 listening to podcasts related to their practice. This image enables the CD to position
20 themselves in the landscape and so helps them to understand how attainable a particular
21 job might be or the differences between similar roles within different organizations.
22 Alignment considers the particular practices a learner chooses to follow and, therefore,
23 how they desire their competence to be judged. Alignment concerns, for example,
24 whether a CD is predominantly interested in working through NGBs or as an
25 independent consultant, whether to undertake an academic qualification, or whether to

1 affiliate with particular national (e.g., UK Coaching) or international associations (e.g.,
2 ICCE). This conception of identity, and of ‘identity work’ - through engagement,
3 imagination and alignment - forms the theoretical foundation on which this
4 investigation is based.

5 Numerous fields have benefitted from research which has considered learning as
6 identity work within the broader concept of LoPs, most notably teacher (e.g.,
7 Colliander, 2020; Mentis et al., 2016) and medical (e.g., Cruess et al., 2019; Di Napoli
8 & Sullivan, 2019) education. For example, research in teacher education has considered
9 the alignment of practitioners in relation to their respective schools (Colliander, 2018),
10 departments (Jauregui et al., 2019) and disciplines (Mentis et al., 2016), and has
11 demonstrated the usefulness of considering learning as identity work as an ongoing
12 process of agentic interpretation, incorporating both the person and extensive contextual
13 factors. The extent to which these findings could inform the field of CD learning has not
14 yet been established. Nonetheless, there is some precedent concerning how the concept
15 of the development of identity has been researched within sports coaching more
16 generally.

17 Research investigating the development of identity in sport coaching has drawn
18 on a wide range of theoretical perspectives, although some common findings have been
19 reported (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2016; Ives et al., 2021). Ives et al. (2021) reported
20 that the identities of the two community sports coaches they observed over a prolonged
21 period were both socially constituted (in their case through the lens of consumerism)
22 and continuously changing. Specifically, the socially constructed aspect of identity has
23 been found to be formed largely through discursive actions and collaborations – e.g.,
24 through discussions and group work with other candidates on coach education
25 programmes (Culver & Bertram, 2017; Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2016). Redgate et al.’s

1 (2020) investigation into a postgraduate diploma in Coach Development, delivered
2 through the Football Association, highlighted the difficulties in demonstrating some
3 learners' meaningful engagement with course content because they struggled to
4 understand how the programme was going to benefit their everyday practice and was
5 therefore not considered important in the development of their professional identity.
6 Nevertheless, Culver and Bertram (2017) reported that a professional development-
7 focussed CoP, founded on social learning theory principles, served to enable graduate
8 sport students to develop their professional identity in ways which enhanced their
9 alignment to an academic role, generated pride in their membership of the group and
10 enhanced their ability to influence others. The effective design and leadership of such
11 programmes has been shown to positively influence identity when the theoretical
12 underpinning is carefully structured to be cognisant of the (pre)dispositions of learners
13 and to ensure alignment with the educational intent of the curriculum (Crues et al.,
14 2019).

15 Cushion et al. (2003) argued that the design of most (coach) learning
16 programmes insufficiently considered the experience of the practitioner, suggesting that
17 the position of this component should be elevated and more profoundly influence
18 curriculum design and delivery. In so doing, educators might better understand some of
19 the factors which influence learners' (pre)dispositions towards the programmes they
20 undertake. Better understanding of learners' (pre)dispositions has featured strongly
21 within broader educational discourse for some time. Indeed, Bruner (2004) argued that
22 the intentionality of learners was strongly related to their experience and perception
23 which, in turn, were heavily culturally influenced. Educators need to recognize the great
24 variety of factors which might influence the effectiveness of these relationships and the
25 broader social interactions learners inevitably encounter within 'training' programmes.

1 Resultantly, the research question underpinning the present investigation was “How
2 might consideration of the concept of identification through engagement, imagination,
3 and alignment, enable educators to better understand CD learning in relation to a formal
4 programme?”

5 **Methodology and methods**

6 Following a Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR)
7 methodology (Ghaye et al., 2008), this investigation draws on a three-year journey of
8 our leadership of a CD learning programme commissioned by an NGB in the UK. The
9 three year timeframe comprises two runs of the course of approximately 18 months
10 each. Ghaye et al. (2008, p. 264) described PAAR as “third generation” action research
11 (AR) and so it represented a suitable methodology for this study as it enables us, as
12 authors and designers of the course, to reflexively and collaboratively, consider our
13 roles as facilitators of learning on an ongoing basis. PAAR demands a focus on building
14 on positive aspects of practice whilst moving away from the traditional spirals and
15 cycles which AR normatively features. PAAR represented an ideal fit for this
16 investigation as we sought to work collaboratively with the CDs, drawing on some of
17 PAAR’s core principles, namely, collective learning and embracing pluralistic ways of
18 knowing – both of which are commensurate with the social theory of learning
19 underpinning this investigation (E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). PAAR
20 has been particularly prominent in the care industry (e.g., James et al., 2014; James et
21 al., 2015; McKeown et al., 2016) although it has also featured in educational (Bergmark
22 & Kostenius, 2009) and sports contexts (Navin et al., 2020). Bergmark and Kostenius
23 (2009) utilized a range of methods including reflections and group discussions to gather
24 students’ perspectives on sustainable school improvement, whilst Navin et al. (2020)
25 demonstrated that PAAR was an effective tool in enabling the operationalization of a

1 leader's values within a Superleague netball club. PAAR features four reflective
2 processes, namely (a) developing an appreciative gaze, (b) reframing lived experiences,
3 (c) building practical wisdom and (d) demonstrating achievement and moving forward
4 (Ghaye et al., 2008). These processes informed this investigation throughout implicitly,
5 as opposed to being directly evident in explicit stages.

6 *The Course*

7 The course was designed for the NGB, was bespoke for that organization, and
8 led to the award of a postgraduate certificate. For the sake of brevity here, but also to
9 reflect our pragmatic dispositions, the course learning outcomes were distilled into
10 concepts which were utilized within our professional discussions namely, (a) enhance
11 criticality, (b) know your organisation and, (c) learning is more than the acquisition of
12 knowledge. These concepts, especially the third, provided specific areas of focus all
13 founded on the development of identity through engagement, imagination and
14 alignment. The course comprised three modules based on learning and pedagogy,
15 leadership, and professional practice. The course featured 16 Study Days delivered
16 predominantly at the NGB's base each month comprising approximately six hours of
17 workshops each. Each Study Day necessitated the completion of several pre-tasks (such
18 as readings and preparation of reflective materials) which required approximately six
19 hours of work, some of which were formatively assessed. The Study Days were largely
20 activity-based and featured extensive group discussion of the pre-task materials. Whilst
21 unprompted, the majority of the group also arranged both pre and post Study Day
22 gatherings featuring debate, collaborative work, and late-night take-away. In addition,
23 learners arranged meetings with tutors on a regular basis. The first and third authors
24 were co-tutors of the course for the first cohort with the addition of the second author
25 appointed to support the second cohort as a learning facilitator.

1 ***Participants***

2 The first cohort comprised 13 CDs (12 male and one female) (Mean age = 45.38
3 ± 10.02 years; Mean experience within the NGB = 5.00 ± 3.21 years). The second
4 cohort comprised 11 CDs (six male and five female) (Mean age = 35.91 ± 8.99 years;
5 Mean experience within the NGB = 5.18 ± 3.82 years). Approval for the investigation
6 was granted by the institutional Research Ethics Panel. At the start of the first Study
7 Day each CD was asked for their consent to be a part of the research – an invitation
8 which was unanimously accepted. For the purposes of this investigation, we will use the
9 term ‘the course’ to represent the postgraduate certificate, whilst ‘programmes’ will
10 relate to the NGB awards the CDs delivered or supported.

11 ***Procedures***

12 Following the principles of PAAR, this investigation was conducted reflexively
13 throughout the three-year period. This meant the data collection procedures were
14 designed to best capture the perceptions and experiences of the CDs as the course
15 evolved. Thus, data were captured throughout the course and comprised five forms,
16 namely (a) reflective materials such as informal presentations, formative reflective tasks
17 and group discussions (197-3,327 words) created by all the CDs on three occasions per
18 cohort, (b) focus groups of five to eight CDs (n = 8; 23-46 mins) conducted by either
19 peers or course tutors at the mid-point and end of each course (all 24 CDs contributed to
20 at least one focus group), (c) individual interviews (n = 8; 40-60 mins) with CDs
21 conducted by the first or second author at the end of each cohort, (d) field notes
22 captured by the first author during the Study Days and (e) regular professional
23 discussions between the authorship team. The individual interviewees were participants
24 who responded to a request for volunteers to help us shape future iterations of the
25 course; this yielded four individual interviews per cohort. All of these materials were

1 transformed or transcribed into word documents amounting to 390 single-spaced A4
2 pages. The reflective materials, focus groups, interviews, field notes and professional
3 discussions followed the principal PAAR method of focussing on what elements gave
4 life and offered positive foundations on which to further enhance the course (Ghaye et
5 al., 2008). We will sometimes refer to the course as a CoP although we use this term to
6 connect this investigation to previous research, rather than as a constitutional theoretical
7 claim.

8 ***Data analysis***

9 The results presented here are the result of a five stage thematic coding
10 framework based on that described by Robson and McCartan (2016). The five stage
11 framework draws on the general principles of thematic analysis initially established by
12 Braun and Clarke (2006) and more recently updated to become ‘reflexive’ thematic
13 analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The data analysis processes were led by the first
14 author and reflexively discussed with the other authors after stages three, four and five
15 had initially been completed. Starting with the data relating to the first cohort, stage one
16 involved familiarization which involved reading, re-reading, sifting and organising the
17 complex and ‘messy’ data set. In stage two, initial codes were generated by allocating
18 terms to the transcripts on a line-by-line and sentence-by-sentence basis. Two hundred
19 initial codes were generated which were then grouped into 24 first order themes (stage
20 three). For example, one first order theme was ‘challenge’ and featured the initial codes:
21 (a) challenging, (b) comfort zones, (c) ‘I think about stuff a lot more’, (d) questioning,
22 (e) wrestling, (f) okay to debate and, (g) discerning. This process was then repeated for
23 the data relating to the second cohort which added a further 87 initial codes, but just
24 three additional first order themes. Stage four was conducted with all of the 27 first
25 order themes which were constructed into a broader network which was subsequently

1 integrated and interpreted (stage five), ultimately yielding five major categories which
2 form the substantive themes constructed from this investigation.

3 At their heart, both PAAR and reflexive thematic analysis are collaborative
4 reflective processes and both require commitment to generating results which reveal
5 shared understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Ghaye et al., 2008). To that end, the three
6 discussions held between the research team were reflective conversations conducted
7 with the aim of finding within the data the most meaningful stories to tell. We always
8 sought to examine the data beyond face value – for example, we reflected on the extent
9 to which we considered the learners had expressed truthful sentiments, and not those
10 which we just wanted to hear, being assured when we could triangulate data or affirm
11 each other’s perspective. The various levels of codes and themes produced initially by
12 the first author were discussed with the rest of authorship team and several elements
13 were subsequently re-labelled, moved to another theme or combined together (Robson
14 & McCartan, 2016). The authorship team ultimately constructed five major categories;
15 (a) (pre)dispositions to the course (b) epistemological development, criticality and
16 theoretical congruity, (c) the learning community, (d) substantive coaching knowledges,
17 and (e) applied practice.

18 ***Rigour***

19 Ghaye et al. (2008) proposed the concepts of inclusivity, emotional engagement,
20 understandability, mutualism, transformation, communicative freedom and moral
21 courage represented the criteria by which the rigour of any PAAR investigation should
22 be considered. In adopting these criteria, we accept Smith and Sparkes’ (2014)
23 proposition that authors of qualitative work should set the quality framework from
24 which their work should be judged. On that basis, we invite the reader to consider the
25 extent to which we evidence that all participants have contributed to the ‘appreciate

1 gaze' developed within this investigation and that this incorporates discernibly
2 emotional perspectives. Understandability, mutualism and transformation will have
3 been achieved if the narrative that follows demonstrates an interdependent perspective
4 which has enabled us all to create onward professional journeys which demonstrate new
5 appreciations of the CD LoP relative to the development of professional identities. This
6 interdependent perspective both acknowledges and celebrates our own involvement in
7 every aspect of the PAAR process. PAAR requires the collaborative development of an
8 appreciative gaze, a shared understanding of our successes and the ways in which those
9 successes might be amplified (Ghaye et al., 2008). In terms of our own positionality, we
10 are aware that aligning with PAAR enhances the likelihood of focussing on the positive
11 aspects of the identity work discussed within this paper. In mitigation, we invite the
12 reader to acknowledge the focus of the subsequent accounts is on the CDs' learning as
13 opposed to our programme design and delivery – we have not sought to promote our
14 own competence and have not represented the CDs' identity work as either simple or
15 unidirectional. Whilst acknowledging that with human closeness comes unavoidable
16 bias, we consider that the extended time we spent with each of the CDs featured in this
17 paper, and the strength and depth of our relationships with them, to be an almost wholly
18 positive factor in being able to tell their stories in the most authentic way possible. Also,
19 we have sought to facilitate CD learning journeys which are ethically and socially
20 justifiable, focused on building better futures for all stakeholders. In addition, we have
21 sought to achieve naturalistic generalisation by taking small snapshots of the CDs'
22 learning journeys and placed them within the broader frame of engagement, imagination
23 and alignment (Tracy, 2010; E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).
24
25

1 **Results and Discussion**

2 Three of the five major categories, namely; (a) (pre)dispositions to the course (b)
3 epistemological development, criticality and theoretical congruity, and (c) the learning
4 community, are particularly pertinent to helping us to understand the CDs'
5 identification through engagement, imagination, and alignment and so will now be
6 presented in turn. Along with a fuller description of how each category is constituted,
7 verbatim quotations will be presented to illustrate themes within the categories and
8 these will be analysed alongside pertinent literature. All names are pseudonyms.

9 *(Pre)dispositions to the course*

10 This category ultimately helps to explain the CDs' (pre)dispositions to the
11 course. I.e., by considering their engagement, imagination and alignment, we discuss
12 the extent to which they saw the course as an important part of the development of their
13 professional identity. Specifically, this section focuses on the tension between the
14 influence of the NGB and the CDs' identity work. Our findings showed that exploring
15 the personal biographies of the CDs, through one of their first reflective tasks, was
16 helpful in shaping the learning environment of the course. An important starting point
17 for us was to understand how prior educational experiences affected the CDs'
18 predispositions; this was different for each individual. For example, Gregg (cohort 1,
19 reflective presentation) said:

20 I was ill at the time of starting and I had already done an MSc in
21 coaching pretty recently and so questioned the value of this course.

22 Would it not be best to use this time to explore a different area? So I
23 questioned it, not that I thought I knew everything, but thinking - is it the
24 best use of time? But what I now know is that I had become dormant in

1 that critical thinking stuff ... I had slipped away from that and I didn't
2 realize that until I really engaged.

3 Gregg's question "is this the best use of time?" is foundational for all learners entering
4 such formal programmes and represents a key challenge to brokers as we consider how
5 to move our participants beyond 'mere' engagement and position their alignment more
6 profoundly. The value of formal learning programmes can be found in many different
7 forms (see Vinson et al., 2019; B. Wenger-Trayner et al., 2019); however, in CD and
8 coach learning, such provision has frequently been perceived to be inadequate (Nash et
9 al., 2017; Piggott, 2012). For Gregg, it was the reminder of the importance of critical
10 thinking which helped him to reconcile the time commitment and enhanced his
11 alignment to the course. Gregg's educational background was similar to some, but very
12 different to most others. Indeed, some CDs had no experience of Higher Education prior
13 to enrolment but were very experienced professionals having worked in various
14 coaching and tutoring contexts for several decades. Angus (cohort 2, individual
15 interview), a former professional athlete with no prior experience of Higher Education,
16 said:

17 I'm not set in my ways but I'm comfortable with my own values and
18 beliefs; I think they haven't changed. I think the information and course
19 content has allowed me to impact those values and beliefs better if
20 anything. You think sometimes because you're not familiar with the
21 terminology it puts that barrier. Becoming familiar with the terminology
22 and the format and just applying yourself the right way allows you to
23 achieve.

24 Negotiating their relationship with academic terminology was an important learning
25 process for several of the CDs and affirms Wenger's (1998) conception of learning as

1 much more than the mere acquisition of knowledge. For Angus, learning on the course
2 involved examining the curriculum subject matter alongside his pre-existing values and
3 beliefs – a strong indication of how engagement with the course was “identity work” (E.
4 Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 20). Angus’s testimony is illustrative of
5 his slow, cautious and partial alignment with the values of the course. Whilst some
6 previous CD research has identified ‘lightbulb’ moments which have yielded truly
7 transformative experiences (e.g., Vinson et al., 2019), our findings revealed less
8 dramatic, and slower, realignments, potentially because the CDs in the present study
9 were much more experienced practitioners (Jarvis, 2010; Trent, 2018). Gregg and
10 Angus’s testimonies are commensurate with general adult learning principles (see, for
11 example, Jarvis, 2010, 2018; Merriam, 2018) and some research in coach learning (e.g.,
12 Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014) in that exploration of the CDs’ biographies helped us
13 understand factors which affected their engagement, imagination and alignment.
14 Throughout the process of designing and delivering the course we were acutely aware
15 of the contested position of academic work in some sports organisations. Indeed, Taylor
16 and Garratt (2010) argued that a strong anti-intellectualism was prevalent in many
17 NGBs and that the ‘terminology’ to which Angus refers is illustrative of the boundary
18 which exists between academic and applied CD practice. Furthermore, we were
19 conscious of E. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015, p. 25) warning that
20 ‘boundary crossing’ has the potential to unhelpfully marginalize aspects of identity
21 when there is conflict between claims to competence between contexts. It remained our
22 strong intent to ensure that the CDs’ claims to competence in the contexts of their
23 academic and applied practices were not in conflict but mutually supportive, and that
24 we would not seek to marginalize any aspect of their identity. One strategy we
25 employed was to explore academic work which we considered would directly relate to

1 their current professional practice (Redgate et al., 2020). Sarah (cohort 1, reflective
2 presentation) articulated how this approach both affirmed and enhanced her professional
3 practice:

4 CoPs - although I was already doing it, I never realized that's what it was
5 called or what it was really there for. This is big for me, because this is
6 what I lead on nationally with the female stuff. I have five female
7 groups that meet quite regularly and make-up my CoPs. The paper that
8 Culver and Trudel wrote has probably helped me the most in terms of
9 why some of them didn't work. The paper also spoke about having a
10 facilitator. I see myself as a facilitator for all those groups; however, I am
11 not sure that is right, I need a designated leader within each of those
12 groups, for those to come up with their own agendas and outcomes.

13 Exploring material such as this described by Sarah helped potentially sceptical members
14 of the group to perceive value in academic work and so enhance the likelihood of them
15 aligning with the course. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) label such boundary interactions
16 as a process of *legitimising coexistence*. In this example, the paper by Culver and Trudel
17 (2008) acts as a boundary object in that it enables Sarah to understand that her
18 participation in her role as tutor and also within the course community is mutually
19 beneficial. Establishing congruence in this way enhanced the likelihood of the CDs
20 aligning with the course because they came to understand that doing so would not
21 threaten their sense of competence within their NGB community and so served to
22 enhance their more general claim to knowledgeability (E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-
23 Trayner, 2015). Similarly to Culver and Bertram (2017), this illustration provides an
24 example of the power of bringing together engagement, imagination and alignment, in
25 terms of the potential positive affect on an individual's professional identity. I.e.,

1 Sarah's professional identity has been strengthened because she has committed
2 meaningfully to the course content (engagement) which has helped her to see the
3 relevance of this material to both her immediate and future professional practice
4 (imagination). This led to her positioning herself closer to the course – being happier to
5 be known as a 'PGCert-er' because she has perceived benefit on these multiple levels
6 (alignment).

7 It was also important to understand the individual differences in the CDs'
8 professional trajectories and how this shaped their dispositions. For example, Martin
9 (cohort 2, mid-point focus group) said:

10 I have been 10 years at the organization now from the age of 22 when I
11 first joined. I was very influenced by the [NGB] - I would deliver in the
12 [NGB] way. This is the first course that has made me go and challenge
13 that. They pose questions that play devil's advocate. It makes you
14 challenge everything. This is shaping the [NGB], it is making me
15 become more like 'this is what I stand for and this bit fits with the [NGB]
16 and this bit doesn't but this bit fits with me' and I will tell people that.

17 By engaging with material which did not directly affirm some of the NGB's core
18 practices, Martin's identity was initially challenged, and then extended through the
19 process of imagination. For example, we spent one morning critiquing the notion of
20 coaching 'competencies' (see D. Collins et al., 2015). In so doing, Martin was able to
21 better understand the inherent challenges with competency-based coaching assessments
22 and so was able to position himself 'ahead' of the NGB in that particular practice.
23 Martin's initial imagination of his future professional self was strongly aligned to the
24 NGB, yet a greater appreciation of the CD LoP helped Martin to reassess his
25 knowledgeability by embracing a much broader vista. Whilst acknowledging the

1 potential to create tension between individuals and their organisation's rhetoric (see
2 Trent, 2018), we argue that approaching professional identity development through
3 better understanding the position of their organisation within the broader LoP, begins to
4 tackle the potential problem of coercive institutional power and the ensuing
5 unchallenged inequalities (Zehntner & McMahon, 2015). The process of enhancing an
6 individual's professional efficacy by engaging with a broader spectrum of stakeholders
7 within the relevant LoP has been reported both in sport (Duarte et al., 2020) and other
8 disciplines (e.g., Goos & Bennison, 2018). Gregg's (cohort 1, reflective note)
9 identification with the organisation was rather different:

10 At the start I was in a place of balance and was professionally drifting. I
11 was frustrated at a lack of career progression and concern regarding a
12 perceived lack of pathway. I had gained only one promotion in 10 years,
13 whilst concurrently becoming an informal sounding board for various
14 people from National youth team coaches, to [top domestic league] first
15 team and Academy staff, to academics and people working across
16 grassroots game, covering aspects of policy writing to supporting the
17 reflective process of practitioners. After this I had reframed my career
18 priorities through help of an informal mentor as well through this course.
19 I found some improved balance through prioritizing personal well-being,
20 recognizing the need to be a more authentic version of self and resist
21 institutional conformity ... I set out to strive for originality and
22 constructive non-conformity.

23 Gregg's starting conception of the CD LoP was much broader than Martin's –
24 evidenced by the number of different stakeholders Gregg cites in his reflection. Here,
25 Gregg is acknowledging the wide-ranging number of other stakeholders which hold the

1 power to affirm (or deny) his claims to competence in the industry. In so doing, Gregg
2 demonstrates a strong appreciation of the power relations affecting him and how these
3 various stakeholders are shaping his imagination (E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-
4 Trayner, 2015). Gregg had amassed sufficient belief in his own claim to
5 knowledgeability that he felt assured in resisting the influence of the NGB and sought
6 ‘constructive non-conformity’ by which he meant not doing things a certain way just
7 because that is how the NGB expected them to be done. Most other members of the
8 cohort had not reached such a self-assured perspective and were still grappling with
9 their epistemological understanding and reconciling perceived theoretical incongruities.

10 ***Epistemological development, criticality and theoretical congruity***

11 In this section, we discuss how some of the CDs demonstrated progress in their
12 epistemological appreciation and that this led to enhanced critical thinking. We will also
13 discuss how gaining a deeper appreciation of the historical development of the
14 programmes they were tutoring, as well as the broader practices of the organization,
15 enabled some CDs to better reconcile their professional beliefs and identity.
16 Furthermore, we will report how the theoretical congruity with their own beliefs
17 enhanced the CDs’ alignment with the course in several different ways.

18 In contrast to Gregg in the previous section, most of the CDs identified strongly
19 with the NGB and this was reflected in the powerful combination of engagement,
20 imagination and alignment – they took great pride in ‘wearing the badge’ and frequently
21 spoke about working for the NGB as ‘the dream’ or end goal of their (current)
22 imagination. However, this may have contributed to a perceived struggle relating to the
23 emergence of their individual identities. For example, Bella (cohort 2, individual
24 interview) said:

1 The battle I went through last year was, I felt I'd lost myself - not really
2 knowing who I was. There was a few bits of feedback that said, 'we only
3 know the [NGB] you' and I couldn't get my head around what they
4 meant because that's my job, that's who I represent ... [Previously] you
5 almost had to conform to a certain way [of being a coach education
6 tutor]; we had a philosophy and we had to stick to it. I think when you've
7 been doing it for so long that kind of becomes you ... Doing the [course]
8 has made me look at myself a bit more. There's no right or wrong. I
9 think that's kind of helped in that I don't have to deliver a certain way all
10 the time; there are different ways of doing things and it just depends on
11 the context...

12 Bella's statement illustrates a sense of institutionalization in the way she felt she was
13 compelled to deliver NGB programmes; an influence so strong, she felt it was dwarfing
14 her capacity to be herself. Such perspectives resonate strongly with findings in medical
15 and teacher education which report how individual's professional identity can be
16 suppressed in more rigid educational approaches which do not acknowledge the
17 importance, or dynamic nature, of this construct within their curriculum design (Crues
18 et al., 2019; N. Hodson, 2020; Mentis et al., 2016). However, engaging with the course
19 helped Bella to find a way to reconcile her beliefs about learning and her identity. The
20 conflict with which she wrestled also reflects the position of CDs reported by Stodter
21 and Cushion (2019, p. 314) who struggled similarly with the "epistemological gap"
22 between course design and delivery. Bella's testimony demonstrates a maturing
23 epistemological understanding which she sees as being demonstrated through
24 recognising the importance of context. These findings affirm Christian et al.'s (2017)
25 research which found that epistemological maturity is an important aspect in

1 understanding professional learning and identity. Bella's engagement with the course
2 helped her to understand there were other credible ways for the NGB to operate. Chloe
3 (cohort 2, mid-point focus group) also explained how several external factors had
4 directly influenced her alignment to the course:

5 I think it [my new understanding] is a combination of (a) the [NGB Level
6 4], (b) that we have just gone through a cultural piece, (c) I just went
7 through some line management training and also (d) the [course]. I used
8 to be like 'I can't cope with 'it depends'', but [yesterday, when tutoring],
9 Martin and I debated something in front of other coaches at an academic
10 level. We were so comfortable with each other and we showed learners it
11 was okay to debate. It was amazing. But we wouldn't have done that if
12 we hadn't gone through the [course] together.

13 Through making sense of several interactions external to the course, Chloe articulates
14 how a range of different experiences have helped legitimize a less binary approach to
15 knowledge and helped her to be more comfortable in making decisions depending on
16 contextual factors. These findings affirm previous research which has asserted that more
17 sophisticated epistemologies acknowledge the complexity, uncertainty and social
18 construction of knowledge (L. Collins et al., 2015; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Grecic
19 & Collins, 2013; Purdy & Potrac, 2016) and that external boundary interactions can be
20 invaluable learning assets (Vinson et al., 2021). A characteristic shared by Bella, Chloe
21 and Martin is their relative youth – all in their 30s and with less than 10 years'
22 experience as a CD, all of which affected their alignment to the organisation because
23 they could not appreciate some of the historical decisions which shaped their current job
24 roles. Bella, Chloe and Martin articulated that, prior to engaging with the course, their
25 general perception was that some programmes and institutional practices were

1 inadequate and poorly thought-through. Chloe (cohort 2, mid-point focus group)
2 articulated how some aspects of the course design had helped address this perception:
3 When we got Trevor and Margaret in, that made me go, ‘well, there is
4 something behind this, they [the NGB] haven’t just stuck their finger up
5 in the air’, so there is theory and there is a thought process. If you know
6 who to talk to, then you can get the understanding you have probably
7 been missing.

8 In Wenger-Trayner’s social theory of learning, Chloe’s enhanced ability to better
9 understand how an institution runs and how the various hierarchies and key
10 stakeholders interact is evidence of both potential and strategic value¹. For most of the
11 CDs, the course presented the first opportunity to deeply interrogate the theoretical
12 congruity of the programmes they were supporting. The historical exploration of how
13 various principles and programmes had formed seemed to help a number of CDs
14 develop a better sense of the relative strengths and weaknesses of certain practices they
15 were asked to follow. By setting these strengths and weaknesses amidst the broader CD
16 LoP, they were able to demonstrate an enhanced claim to knowledgeability (Di Napoli
17 & Sullivan, 2019; M. Hodson, 2020; E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).
18 Griffiths et al. (2018) and Nash et al. (2017) argued that the chaotic approach of many
19 NGBs has led to coaches and CDs being unclear about what constitutes ‘legitimate’
20 learning. Our findings affirm that some of our cohort were uncertain about the
21 legitimacy of the course from the NGB’s perspective and that this may have hindered
22 their alignment. As expected from a cohort of conscientious professionals, attendance,

¹ For a detailed discussion of the different types of value, please see (B. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020)

1 alongside other immediate forms of engagement such as contributing to discussions and
2 completing independent study tasks, were never problematic. However, we accepted
3 that it would take time, and require some considerable identity work, to ensure
4 individuals aligned with the course on a deeper level.

5 *The Learning Community*

6 In this section we discuss how we sought to build a learning community within
7 each cohort and that this concept was crucial in understanding the development of the
8 CDs' professional identities – particularly following the instigation of a 'learning
9 facilitator' in the second cohort. The decision to appoint a learning facilitator is also an
10 illustration of the continuous PAAR processes of (c) building practical wisdom and, (d)
11 demonstrating achievement and moving forward (Ghaye et al., 2008). The appointment
12 decision was made by the first and third author following an informal review of the
13 experience of the first cohort in which we identified the need for an additional level of
14 mediation between us, as programme tutors, and the learners. The learning community
15 we sought to create was founded on several key principles including the desire to
16 enhance the criticality of the CDs and to do so through a collaborative, social learning,
17 approach. An important aspect of our course design sought to foster discussion through
18 embracing social learning principles including collaborative and co-constructed
19 knowledge. Chloe (cohort 2, end-point focus group) explained that this served a
20 particular purpose:

21 We rarely spend time as a team talking about mentoring and this stuff
22 [learning] because we are do-ers, we are out there doing stuff. When was
23 actually the last time we sat down and went 'do you know what, where
24 are we at? What are we doing?'

1 These findings support previous research which has suggested that facilitating balanced
2 exchanges of ideas whilst ensuring mutual respect for differences were valued
3 components of the course and enabled the generation of collaborative solutions to
4 problems (Bertram et al., 2017; Crawford & L’Hoiry, 2017; Kuklick et al., 2016).
5 Nonetheless, this did not mean that the CD’s alignment to the course was uniform. In
6 fact, as Bella (cohort 2, individual interview) explains, there were distinctly different
7 groups within her cohort:

8 You’ve got the group that kind of spend the days together with yourself
9 [author 2], even if it’s just like coming down the night before, so I think
10 there’s almost a bit of a core group of people that are forming. But then
11 you’ve almost got people on the edge, so I’m probably one of the ones
12 on the edge that just dips in and out when I need to.

13 In Lave and Wenger’s (1991) original conception of social learning theory, participation
14 in a CoP was described as being initially peripheral (i.e., as a ‘newcomer’), before
15 becoming more centrally aligned with the group (i.e., as an ‘old-timer). Whilst effective
16 CoPs require mutual engagement and joint enterprise, participants’ contributions are
17 never equal (Wenger, 1998). Early CoP research was, perhaps, overly concerned with
18 coercing all members to move towards the centre of the community’s practice, but this
19 frequently proved problematic (Culver et al., 2009). By embracing the concept of
20 knowledgeability, we acknowledged that, despite relatively equal engagement (in terms
21 of attendance, study day contributions and completion of work), the CDs would align to
22 the course to different degrees. E. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) were
23 keen to stress that participation should be considered legitimate at any level and that it is
24 neither realistic nor desirable to consider that everybody in the CoP should become an
25 ‘old-timer’.

1 Naturally, facilitating a course based on social learning principles required
2 particular consideration of our relationships with the cohort. Commensurate with Bruner
3 (1966), it was evident throughout the course that the relationship between us and the
4 learners was never neutral, but founded on our unique biographies and the CDs’
5 perceptions of our, to name just a few, approachability, credibility and relatability. For
6 example, Sophie (cohort 2, individual interview) said:

7 I prefer to speak to [author 3] more than [author 1]. I think that’s
8 because of [author 1]’s education background. Whereas [author 3]
9 worked for the NGB so he understands it a little bit more. But you’ve
10 [author 2] simplified it and I guess it’s because currently you’re going
11 through a process [a PhD] which is again similar and it’s not so long ago
12 that you’ve felt like that.

13 Social learning leadership is a wide-ranging concept. Whilst much sport-based CoP
14 research has focussed on the role of a facilitator (e.g., Culver & Trudel, 2008; Garner &
15 Hill, 2017) which Gilbert et al. (2009) proposed should preferably be a peer to the
16 group. Sophie’s testimony highlights how this could never be a desirable or appropriate
17 function for either [author 1] or even [author 3]. The hierarchical relationship between
18 us [author 1/author 3] and the CDs existed as we were the formal gatekeepers to
19 completing the course and gaining a postgraduate award. Therefore, we could not locate
20 ourselves within the heart of the ‘CoP’ but had to adopt a different function.

21 Furthermore, we were conscious that we did not want to ‘institutionalize’ the CoP by
22 forcing the CDs’ engagement and thus increase the likelihood that the whole structure
23 would “slip through the cracks” (Wenger, 1998, p. 229). Whilst [author 3] was able to
24 ‘bridge the gap’ in some regards, in the following extract from a professional discussion
25 between the three authors, we debate how other discontinuities in our relationships with

1 the CDs was particularly evident after the completion of the first cohort and how this
2 informed the appointment of the facilitator:

3 [Author 1]: There were clearly some gaps between us and them [the first
4 cohort] in terms of their openness, their willingness at times to admit
5 what they struggled with and there was also the limitation of time for us
6 [author 3 and author 1]. The appointment of you [author 2] as a
7 facilitator was about trying to walk the walk - we talk endlessly about the
8 importance of CoPs and there is unquestionably a role for facilitation in
9 there - not as an assessor or tutor - something else.

10 B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) addressed the need to appreciate the
11 different forms of social learning leadership which may be required and proposed
12 further descriptors such as enabling, vertical, core group, service, brokering and systems
13 convening. Whilst our findings affirm the benefit of internal facilitation, this
14 professional discussion also reinforces the importance of appreciating different types of
15 boundary encounter (Vinson et al., 2021) and, in the context of LoPs, for a range of
16 leadership roles (B. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). Most CDs concurred
17 that the role of the facilitator was important. Jackie (cohort 2, reflective note) wrote:

18 Having [author 2] within the PGCert cohort has been a huge support.
19 [author 2] relates tasks or discussions into simple terms - something that
20 is much needed for me. Although we can ask the two tutors any questions,
21 [author 2] has given something extra to the group... I get lost in the day-
22 to-day job so when I need to get back into the swing of things for the
23 course, [author 2] has taken time to explain and point me in a direction
24 where to find papers... I honestly think I'd have given up a long time ago
25 without the support and discussions I've had from [author 2].

1 These findings affirm the positive role of a facilitator when the hierarchy is flattened
2 and where there is genuine commitment to working on learning goals informally over a
3 sustained period of time (Gilbert et al., 2009). Jackie’s journey reinforces the
4 importance of providing support for learners which extends beyond the traditional tutor-
5 learner relationship of many formal learning opportunities (Zehntner & McMahon,
6 2015). For some of the CDs, the course was extremely challenging, and, without the
7 role of the facilitator, some would have engaged less and may not have been successful.
8 Jimmy (cohort 2, reflective presentation) said:

9 I was gonna drop out of it about 12 times because I just don’t get it, but
10 then I’ve got a stubborn nature that I don’t want to give up. Jackie was
11 like ‘well, if you give up, then I’m giving up’, so she put that pressure on
12 me. When I understand it, I really enjoy doing it, but then it fills me with
13 anxiety. I don’t feel inferior but some of the others are on a different
14 wavelength in terms of what they understand to me. Anyway, I’d be a
15 real hypocrite to my lad if I gave up at this first time of real struggle.

16 Jimmy’s testimony illustrates that effective CoPs are not benign echo chambers where
17 everyone’s opinion is simply affirmed – a warning Wenger et al. (2002) offered
18 explicitly. Instead, effective CoPs are spaces where invested practitioners are
19 challenged on multiple levels (Culver et al., 2021; Kuklick et al., 2016). Ultimately,
20 there was a tension between Jimmy’s engagement and his potential alignment with the
21 course which was maintained by the challenges he faced in understanding some of the
22 academic material. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) argue that these tensions can either
23 result in hybridization – where the practices of both communities are brought together
24 and reconciled, or they can result in maintaining the uniqueness of their intersection. In
25 this latter element, the practices are not integrated, but celebrated for their unique

1 contribution to knowledgeability. Neither concept is superior to the other – in Jimmy’s
2 case, it is unclear which mechanism better represents his engagement.

3 **Conclusions and recommendations**

4 This investigation sought to answer the question ‘How might consideration of
5 the concept of identification through engagement, imagination, and alignment, enable
6 educators to better understand CD learning in relation to a formal programme?’. It is
7 beyond the scope of a PAAR investigation to suggest how other facilitators of learning
8 should design their formal programmes. However, as we offer some conclusions
9 throughout this section, we will also suggest how we will seek to utilize our reflections
10 in our future work. Other learning facilitators may see some value to their own practice
11 in wrestling with our ruminations. In the present investigation we have shown that,
12 despite working in similar roles for the same NGB, the CDs’ identities were highly
13 individualized. Resultantly, it was crucially important for us, as tutors and facilitators,
14 to understand how to shape their experiences to enhance their engagement, imagination
15 and alignment. When we facilitated this identity work effectively, the course helped the
16 learners to better understand the renegotiation of their professional identities as they
17 expanded their appreciation of the broader CD LoP. In some cases, by specifically
18 addressing the CDs’ (pre)dispositions to the course, we were able to offer the learners a
19 more relevant and relatable programme to which they could choose to align – or not.
20 The learners’ prior educational experiences, current imaginations of their professional
21 futures and the relevance they were able to attach to some of the academic material, all
22 affected the way in which they aligned with the course. It was evident that, although the
23 CDs all aligned to the course to different degrees, there was deeply meaningful identity
24 work going on within each individual. All passed the course, yet there were very
25 different degrees of alignment as each professional sought to weigh what kind of CD

1 they wanted to be. For many, this involved seeing beyond the more immediate
2 boundaries of the NGB and better understanding the broader LoP in which they were
3 operating. For those whose engagement, imagination and alignment were effectively
4 combined, a powerful experience was evidently negotiated. These concepts will feature
5 strongly in the planning and facilitation of future learning environments we construct.

6 Through a maturing epistemological appreciation, several CDs reconciled the
7 juxtaposition between the espoused constructivist underpinning of the organisation and
8 their experiences of the courses they were asked to deliver. Not only did this serve to
9 help the CDs better understand their professional roles, but enabled them to see that
10 their claim to knowledgeability was being enhanced. Embracing a ‘Landscapes’
11 perspective, in this case through the adoption of the lens of identity work, enabled us to
12 address the gaps highlighted by Cushion (2003) and Stodter and Cushion (2019). This
13 perspective has also provided a theoretical model of learning which has helped tackle
14 the incompatibility of the design of the courses they are asked to support and the
15 mediation of their own learning programmes. We will continue to reflect on how a
16 ‘Landscapes’ perspective can effectively shape our own practice of facilitation to help
17 learners build enhanced knowledgeability.

18 It is also evident that consideration of the different form of social learning
19 leadership constructed around such courses is highly influential in shaping the
20 engagement, imagination and alignment of the learners. Future research should further
21 explore the role and functions of the different forms of social learning leadership in
22 longitudinal courses such as this and seek to better understand how these individuals
23 shape the professional identities of the learners they support. Whilst we have been able
24 to make some contribution to better understanding the importance of a learning
25 facilitator in the present context, we are keenly aware that different forms of social

1 learning leadership, namely enabling, vertical, core group, service, brokering, and
2 systems convening (see E. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021) should be
3 explicitly investigated in other CD learning contexts. In concluding this investigation,
4 we commit to further exploring how such learning leadership roles might be effectively
5 deployed to support environments we deliver and support in the future.

6 **Declaration of interest**

7 The authors declare there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests
8 to report.

9

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