EXPLORING A COACH'S APPLICATION OF ANDRAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES IN THE FACILITATION OF LEARNING FOR MASTERS AND YOUTH CANOE/KAYAK ATHLETES

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INTRODUCTION

Adult sportspersons, or Masters athletes (MAs), require coaching approaches that are nuanced compared to those with younger age cohorts (Callary et al., 2015; Ferrari et al., 2016; Young et al., 2014). Callary et al. (2015) noted that aspects of such nuanced approaches appear to closely parallel some of the principles in Knowles et al.'s (2012) **Andragogy in Practice Model (APM)**.

The APM is used to understand principles that help instructors facilitate learning in adults. Six core principles relate to learners': *need to know* the purpose and content of learning before undertaking it; *self-concept* as being capable of self-directing learning; *prior experiences* that influence current learning; *readiness to learn* in response to a specific need or desire for the learning outcomes; *orientation to learning* that is life-centered; and learners' *motivation to learn* on the basis of internal needs (Knowles et al., 2012). Although studied broadly in adult learning, APM has yet to be examined in sport coaching.

Purpose: to understand if and how each of the andragogical principles were evidenced in a coach's perceptions of how she approached learning situations for both Masters and youth athletes, and whether the principles manifested differently with one group relative to the other.

PARTICIPANT & METHODS

An instrumental case study design (Punch, 2005) focused on one **participant**:

- A female, 30-year-old canoe/kayak coach at an Eastern Canadian club.
- She had 14 years of experience coaching MAs, and 9 years with youth.
- Certified with Competition-Development NCCP accreditation.
- At the time of the study, she coached both MAs (30-65 yrs) and youth athletes (12-15 yrs) in separate groups: 1-3 sessions, for 2-6 total hrs/wk weekly with MAs; up to 8 sessions, for 20 hrs/wk with youth.

Data collection & analysis:

- Three semi-structured interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) with the coach, each lasting 90-120 minutes in duration.
- Probes were informed by participant observation of learning situations that occurred during coach-facilitated training sessions prior to the interviews.
- Data were analyzed using a deductive analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), organizing quotes into categories representative of the APM's six core principles.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The learners' need to know

- The coach used an informational approach with the **MAs** to respond to their inquisitive, detail-oriented nature:

"For example, some MAs didn't understand the 'wobble' drill. They said, 'You're telling me to wobble, but what does that mean?' And I'm like, 'Just slide around on your seat'. And they said, 'But I'll tip'. So they think so much about things, whereas kids are like, 'You asked me to do that, ok, I'll do it'."

The MAs' desire to know the content and reasons before comfortably partaking in the learning is consonant with Knowles et al. (2012)'s *need to know* principle.

- The coach recognized that the **youth** were far less inquisitive and appeared uncomfortable approaching her with questions. In response, she explained how she would intervene with information without their prompt:

"I have to pull [their thoughts] out of the youth. They don't come up to me as much. Their parents will tell me, 'Oh my gosh, he's been so nervous'. So then I really make a note to go up to the individual and see what I can do to help."

The coach provided this information in a strategic and motivational manner. She provided explanation for drills so that the athletes could understand their reasons for training:

"With youth, I say, 'This is why we're doing what we're doing. We're going to train eight times a week all year round because everyone else [in competitive clubs] is doing it, so we have to keep up. And we're going to take advantage of eight practices a week to try to touch on every single pillar of performance'."

Self-concept of the learner

- The coach believed the **MAs** had a need to seek autonomy in their decisions to train, and responded by facilitating situations where they could self-direct (Knowles et al., 2012):

"The [MAs] were like, 'We're not paddling in that cold weather', and we're like, 'Ok'. It was a really long winter. I'm not going to force a grown 60 year-old to paddle. They don't have a problem telling me they don't want to do something when their safety comes into play."

She readily offered the MAs decision-making opportunities as a group in the planning and modification of their training. Contrarily, she felt as though the youth would not respect the integrity of the program if offered the same degree of latitude:

"If I let kids decide what they wanted to do, they'd play 'kick the can' and 'capture the flag' all day. Nothing would get done. And Masters do want things to get done, so I let them [choose what to do] sometimes. Their feedback is heard."

- The coach recognized that her **youth** athletes were also self-directed in their training at times, but only in coach-supervised situations:

"In Fall and Spring (off-season), I'm mostly a safety boat (laugh). I'm coaching, but it's totally self-directed. [I say], 'Guys, the workout is 12 or 15k'. And these kids do it [on their own]."

"I don't think I could trust my [youth] group entirely to run a practice. Would they do it properly? No, not really. They're self-directed [but only] when we're watching them."

Prior experiences of the learner

- When considering the **MAs'** past experiences, the coach spoke only of those from sport or similar motoric domains. She described **MAs** as having minimal prior sport experiences which translated to challenges in their current learning:

"When the MAs learned to paddle, they developed certain habits and they're hard to come out of. And also they just can't change their habits because they don't have the skill."

The coach's low estimations of MAs' prior motor skill and experience, as well as her disregard of experiences from non-sport specific domains contradicts Knowles et al. (2012)'s core principle which proposes that educators may benefit learners by acknowledging and valuing their prior experiences brought to current learning situations.

- In contrast, the coach did not speak of a lack of experience being an issue with **youth**. Instead, she sought to understand how she could use the specific skills the athletes learned from other coaches as tools in present learning situations:

"Youth tend to be coached by different coaches [prior to working with me]. So I made a note to never contradict another coach, but to ask an athlete, 'Hey, do you want to explain to me what it is that you were working on and how you came to have that skill?' They'll say, 'Oh, this coach told me to do it'. And I'll say, 'Alright. Do you know why?' We'll just have a dialogue."

Readiness to learn

- The coach acknowledged **MAs**' personal, non-sport obligations that curtailed their ability to attend training as consistently as the youth:

"MAs have their priorities in their lives and those come first. The number of athletes who are consistently here varies. For example, if they've got teenage kids, it varies at the end of the school year."

Resultantly, the coach felt that she was not able to facilitate competitive, serious-minded learning situations in training for MAs to the same extent as she could with **youth,** who were generally more consistent:

"I have more time with my youth athletes. They have a lot bigger goals. Not that Masters' goals aren't big, but with the youth, it's just a different mindset. They've got their eyes on Junior Worlds and Canada Games and hopefully a higher competition. MAs want to be the best that they can be and race at the national level, but the time dedicated to the sport is different so that's why things just seem different on the water when I coach them."

- Despite their varied attendance, the coach understood the MAs as being more 'socially coachable' than the youth, and she appreciated the respect and maturity they exemplified:

"I think that the Masters respect the role of a coach sometimes more than youth. I think youth do respect the coach but sometimes they think they know better. Masters do know their bodies quite well. I'm not going to push [MAs] when they tell me [exactly] what they're capable of."

Thus, the coach equated the **MAs**' readiness to learn (Knowles et al., 2012) with their degree of "coachability", and **youths**' readiness in proportion to the time they spent with her in training.

Orientation to learning

- The coach used similar learner-centered questioning strategies with both age cohorts. She looked for the athletes' input to engage them in her direction:

*"Yesterday, (name of **MA**) came up to me and said, 'I am entered in a 1000-meter race in K1 (one-person kayak). I'm so nervous, I don't know what to do'. I said, 'Give me three things you need to work on', and so he listed three things. Then I broke down 1000 meters, and I placed each technical focus 250 meters apart. It's like a light bulb went off."*

*"[I often ask **youth** athletes in crew boats], 'How did it feel?' 'Oh, well our timing was off for our legs, so we're going to try this drill and we're going to really focus on this'. 'Great'. And if they're wrong, I'll tell them. I'll be like, 'Actually, I'm going to get you guys to try this'."*

- However, she acknowledged that notions of problem-solving looked quite different between cohorts. With MAs, she included them in the planning and modification of training sessions on the basis of their preferences and capabilities:

"The problem solving happens with coach and **MA** when I have a program and they've got something hindering them from completing it. We work together. So problem solving or modification, I feel like they coincide. Everyone has to figure that out for themselves how they're going to handle a race type situation, but I provide them with a direction and resources, and then they take what works for them."

With **youth**, the coach focused on facilitating problem-solving for technical improvements, which prompted more explicit problem-centered exercises such as video analysis:

"The past few weeks, we've been going through slow motion video with each athlete. I send the video to kids throughout the year and I just ask them to e-mail me back with two things [they feel] they're doing well, two things [they feel] they're not doing well, and a drill that would work on the area for improvement."

Motivation to learn

- The coach worked to facilitate a training climate for **MAs** that was one of encouragement and support. She felt that this approach was important in responding to the intrinsic motives (Knowles et al., 2012) of the athletes:

"With Masters, I don't want to discourage them. So I find out what they're working on, I'll let them know, 'Hey, I could tell [you were working on that]!' or, 'This is really good, but I want you to add this'. I had a whole athletic career of being critiqued and the reality is that constructive criticism or applause feels really good, too, sometimes. So I praise their efforts and let them know that, 'Hey, I can tell what you're working on, so that's great'."

In contrast, she described taking a stricter approach with **youth** in response to competitive goals that were very pronounced in their training, and in response to extrinsic motives she felt they needed:

"For the kid who doesn't want to be there, I'll say, 'You're here anyway, so do the work'. Perhaps I'm hard on them; I wouldn't say that to a MA. I would never say, 'You're here, do the work'. I'd say, 'That was great! How did it feel?'"

"Not every kid likes working hard. However, they know that it's an Olympic sport and we have the best girl and a handful of the best under-23 athletes in the country. They are doing the same things that these individuals did at their age. So it makes their dreams more of a reality [because] they're on the same path, and it's pretty neat to see."

CONCLUSIONS

- There is evidence of the andragogical principles in the coach's approaches with both older and younger cohorts of athletes. The APM (Knowles et al., 2012) appears to have utility in the sport coaching domain, however, it may not be a model of instruction that is applied uniquely to older adults.
- The coach's perceptions of her approaches with MAs were largely andragogical, or adult-oriented, and those for youth were more closely aligned with traditional pedagogical approaches (Siedentop & Tannehill, 2010). We note however that notions of both andragogy and traditional pedagogy were evident, to some extent, with both MAs and youth. Thus, we acknowledge andragogy's application in sport coaching exists on a continuum (Knowles et al., 2012), where coaches can pick and choose certain principles on the basis of the cohort they are working with and the learning needs of those specific athletes.

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