

Quality Counts: Critical Features for Neophyte Professional Development

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The aim of the study was to examine and reflect on the learning experiences of a neophyte sport psychologist. Over a 9-week applied internship the first author kept a reflective diary that followed Boud's (2001) three elements of journal writing. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) of the data identified 11 themes from the diary, 8 of which were contextualized in 3 self-narrative accounts, including the working environment, anxiety, confidence, being a performer, being a learner, relationships, feedback and practical content. Reflecting on these incidents the neophyte's supervisor offers another perspective, and along with the narrative accounts, furthers our understanding of important factors, and indicates recommendations to ensure quality training for professional development.

To ensure the future reputation of applied sport psychology, Silva, Conroy, and Zizzi (1999) highlighted graduate student training as one issue demanding attention in the field. Subsequent studies have attempted to fill this gap in the literature. Research into the professional development of neophyte practitioners and its supervision has extended our understanding through studies including survey (Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997; Van Raalte et al., 2000; Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker, 2004; Williams & Scherzer, 2003), self-narrative (Holt & Streat, 2001; Tammen, 2000; Tonn & Harmison, 2004), questionnaire (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1994), interview (Tod, Marchant, & Andersen, 2007), and reflective practice (Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007; Knowles, Gilbourne, Tomlinson, & Anderson, 2007).

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One area of research that has been encouraged recently is the process of neophyte service delivery (e.g., Cropley et al., 2007; Knowles et al., 2007; Tod et al., 2007). Through in-depth self-narrative reflections practitioners have shared their experiences and offered guidance to future trainees including confronting anxieties, seeking supervisor support, and conducting reflective practice (e.g., Holt & Streat, 2001; Tonn & Harmison, 2004).

Feeling anxious before, and during initial applied experiences has been reported by a number of graduate trainees (Tod et al., 2007) and first-time practitioners (Tonn & Harmison, 2004). For example, during an internship, Tammen (2000) described feeling as if he was, "flying by the seat of his pants" (p. 189). Reporting these insecurities is thought to help normalize the experience and help prepare future neophyte trainees for encountering these feelings (Tod et al.). Further research would help to confirm not just how common such experiences are, but the source of anxiety to help supervisees and supervisors manage it effectively.

The recommendation of seeking supervisor support confirms the significant role of professional elders in training and development (e.g., Tonn & Harmison, 2004). Supervised practice enables sport psychologists to, "hone their skills, learn about themselves, and better serve the needs of the athlete-clients" (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000, p. 162). Supervisors offer a wealth of knowledge and experience to positively guide the development of neophytes.

Self-reflective explorations into neophyte professional development have, to date, mainly been presented from the perspective of the trainee. Although supervisors have taken part in surveys (e.g., Watson et al., 2004) and interviews (e.g., Tod et al., 2007), few studies have combined rich contextual narrative with the supervisor's perspective (for an exception see Andersen, Van Raalte, & Harris, 2000). Examining the perceptions of the supervisor will lead to more fully informed recommendations for improvements to supervised experiences. Balancing neophyte experiences with the learning, developmental, and practical issues of which the supervisors are more aware strengthens potential implications of research.

The use of reflective practice is not just an approach to insightful research but is strongly recommended to neophyte practitioners as a valuable method for developing self-awareness, knowledge in action, and the delivery of sport psychology services (Cropley et al., 2007). Reflection facilitates experiential learning by offering a method to access, and make sense of, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in specific environments. Therefore, completion of systematic reflections is considered integral to applied practice, and the process of accreditation (e.g., www.bases.org.uk, 2004).

A review by Tod (2007) noted parallels between the development of neophyte sport psychologists and counselors, and outlined Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) model of professional development. Derived from interview data with therapists and counselors, this model describes how neophytes often experience acute anxiety, and self-doubt. How these levels of anxiety are perceived by beginning practitioners is pivotal in fostering a positive approach to professional development, as opposed to career stagnation or early termination from the field.

During these initial, and often vulnerable, stages the supervisory relationship plays a central role (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Worthen & McNeill, 1996). According to Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003), an optimal supervisory relationship

can facilitate a “developmental approach” so that trainees view experiences as challenges and are willing to try out new ideas. In contrast, a “non-developmental approach” is more defensive and trainees feel threatened and become closed to advice. Understanding how the optimal supervisory relationship is developed and the obstacles that might prevent it forming could usefully guide future training practices.

In light of his review, Tod (2007) recognized a need to further our understanding of neophyte professional development in the field of sport psychology; specifically, to examine the perceptions of neophyte practitioners and those of their supervisors over time. One approach that has been shown to be effective in extending our knowledge and understanding of certain phenomena is to draw upon highly personalized accounts (Sparkes, 2000). Therefore, this study aims to examine and reflect on the neophyte experiences of the first author over a 9 week applied sport psychology internship, through an in-depth examination of valued incidents as perceived by the supervisee and her supervisor.

Method

The Neophyte Sport Psychologist: Introducing “I”

I gained an undergraduate degree (Psychology) and postgraduate diploma specializing in sport psychology including specific focus on psychological skills training (PST), consultancy, and presentation. The internship occurred during the concluding stages of my Masters degree. I had initial applied experience under supervision, on workshops and individual support, including assessment and goal setting. In addition to relevant education and training experience, I had over 10 years of personal experience as a competitive sports person and a year’s experience of assistant coaching. Further experience from two years in business gave me skills in marketing and supervising personnel directly relevant to the internship work.

I was delighted to be offered an internship following a rigorous selection process. The opportunity to develop professional skills and knowledge was very exciting. But as the internship grew closer, my excitement was interspersed with doubt and uncertainty about being able to meet the internship demands. My theoretical and philosophical approach was informed by my postgraduate study and I viewed behavior change through a cognitive behavioral lens. Guided by the professional practice literature, I also appreciated the critical role of the consultant-athlete relationship and the need to tailor intervention work to the needs of the individual (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999). My work during the internship was therefore underpinned by the tenets of cognitive behavior therapy coupled with a client centered focus.

The Internship and Supervisor: 9 Weeks in a Nutshell

The internship provided development opportunities under supervision including group workshops, one-on-one intern-athlete sessions, and marketing. I prepared and delivered one-hour workshops to athletes aged between eight and 18 years, from individual and team sports. In addition, I had up to five individual clients on a weekly basis including an intake session, observation, video-review, education,

and PST. I also marketed sport psychology services to the client group. Formal supervision, guided by British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) supervised experience documentation, was conducted in week two, three, six, seven, and nine of the internship, as well as daily supervisory debrief sessions following applied work. Over 9 weeks I conducted 26 hr of group, and 100 hr of individual work.

The internship was led by a team of six supervisors who predominantly adopted an educational approach to applied practice, with five of the team emphasizing a combined humanistic and cognitive-behavioral framework. My “go to” supervisor had Masters and PhD level graduate training in counseling psychology and sport science; he was internship coordinator and held BASES Accreditation and Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) certification. Having experienced the internship program as both a supervisee and supervisor, he was in a position to provide a unique perspective into the experience.

Data Collection

The primary data source was my reflective diary that provided a personal honest, rich, and insightful account. Boud’s (2001) reflective learning model was selected over other models of reflection because it provided a structured framework for holistic reflection that encouraged me to reexperience my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to, “retrieve...the rich texture of events as they unfolded” (Boud, 2001, p. 14). Boud’s (2001) model, previously used for data collection (Beylefeld, Nena, & Prinsloo, 2005) as well as learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985), was practical given the time-pressured environment.

Boud et al.’s (1985) model holds two assumptions; that learning is grounded in prior experiences, and reflective practitioners must use intellect, feelings, and senses in learning opportunities. To facilitate a level of engagement during reflective practice to satisfy these assumptions Boud (2001) suggests practitioners should: (1) revisit the experience paying particular attention to negative and positive feelings; (2) reevaluate the experience from an emotionally removed position; and (3) make a commitment to change. These stages were prompted by the questions, “What happened? So what? What now?”.

I recorded all internship experiences in a daily diary (What happened?) with a 24 hr delayed reflection on the meaning of the experiences (So what? and What now?). At this stage no criteria were used to de-select material, and both content and process of experiences in, and outside of, the internship were recorded, including workshops, one-on-one sessions, supervisor meetings, and informal interactions with peers, supervisors, coaches, and athletes.

Data Analysis

I wanted to create an in-depth insight into my experiences focusing on the most salient development issues emanating from a prolonged and persistent period of reflective experience. To identify salient issues we used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003) to analyze systematically the diary data to identify core themes. IPA required me to revisit closely, and interpret, my internship experiences using the following staged process; repeated

readings of the diary to ensure full engagement with the material, preliminary coding of emerging themes based on my interpretation, clustering of themes into broader themes based on their similarity, and checking these against the raw data to ensure my lived experience recorded in the diary had been reflected and no new themes emerged.

As themes only provide “the skeleton” for the story of my internship (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005), primary themes were illuminated through self-narrative critical incidents. Writing the critical incidents was a cyclical process; a draft was read and edited repeatedly until the story was accurate and coherent (Ellis & Bouchner, 2000). The supervisor then added reflection on content in relation to the anticipated plans for development through the internship.

To avoid gross self-indulgence that threatens in-depth personalized accounts (Coffey, 1999) decisions were discussed with two experienced research associates; a “critical friend” who questioned classification of data themes, and a “devil’s advocate” who challenged the analysis to ensure a robust case was made for the interpretation (Krane, Andersen, & Streaan, 1997).

By combining IPA to identify key themes with critical incidents, selected with a clear rationale to represent the majority of themes in context, the credibility (through prolonged and persistent observation) and dependability (through an auditable system for deciding on themes and selecting critical incidents) of the research were both enhanced.

Finding the Right Ontological and Epistemological Voice

To reveal and explore my learning and development experiences, the critical incidents are intended to provide a “warts and all” account that is believable and authentic. The intention is for the reader to fully understand the challenges, uncertainties, triumphs, and failings I experienced and see how these relate to key issues in my professional learning and development. It is important to emphasize that the experiences are not selected as models of good practice. It seems likely that formative real world experiences involve overcoming obstacles, perceived weaknesses, and moments of self-doubt. A greater understanding of feelings and thoughts at these times may contribute to facilitating the crucial learning and professional development that occurs.

Results and Discussion

My diary comprised over 70,000 words from which 48 first order and 11 second order themes emerged through IPA. Of the second order themes, *working environment*, *anxiety*, *confidence*, *being a performer*, *being a learner*, *relationships*, *feedback*, and *practical content* are discussed and contextualized in three critical incidents that follow. The remaining three themes, *the bigger picture*, *integrated practice* and *pragmatic issues*, were constant features of the internship rather than components of any one critical incident and are summarized below. Three of the six supervisors feature in the critical incidents: the third author, Angus; and two others who have been given the pseudonyms Peter and Thomas.

Critical Incident 1

The first incident describes the perceptions I held following one of my workshops, and how feelings of inadequacy and a realization that I did not know how to make changes, propelled me to seek supervisor support. A number of themes are contextualized in the incident, notably the impact of feedback on fluctuating levels of anxiety and confidence associated with workshop performance. Furthermore, the theme of being a learner is illustrated through seeking supervisor support and this led to a change in the supervisory relationship from one influenced by my impression management to a more open and honest dyad. The incident also reflects the intensity of the working environment running workshops on consecutive days.

Developing Group Workshop Skills (Day 17–18). The workshop was timetabled immediately after lunchtime, and nearly 50 seats were filled by athletes varying in age and ability. Although it was my tenth workshop in as many days, I still felt nervous before I began. The 1 hr workshop was entitled “Overcoming Adversity”, and I had worked hard to prepare a three page overview of the session, which now lay on the stage behind me. I wanted to deliver the workshop without consulting my notes, however knowing that they were close at hand helped to calm my nerves.

I was unsure of what experiences the athletes previously had with sport psychology, so I began by asking a question, “What does sport psychology mean to you?”. However, no one offered an answer. To give the athletes some thinking time, I waited in silence until it grew to an uncomfortable point. Rather than press them for an answer, and as a way of trying to engage the athletes, I decided to broaden the discussion to sporting performance by asking them, “What are the ideal characteristics of athletes in your sport?”. Their response was more immediate and I began to write down what they said on a flip chart. They produced a range of characteristics covering physical, technical, tactical, and psychological components of performance. As ideas started to dry up after a few minutes of brainstorming, I drew a large circle on a flipchart. I then asked the athletes to help me divide it into four pieces, with each piece representing a different component of performance. The size of the piece depended on the perceived importance of each component to the athletes. The exercise seemed to be going well, although I had an underlying concern that the athletes would not consider the psychological component to be very important, and I would then struggle for the remainder of the workshop to get them to “buy in.” Fortunately they considered psychology to account for 50% of their performance when dividing up the chart. Relieved, I then quoted a well-known international athlete to reinforce their views.

Returning to my preplanned structure I moved on to facilitate another group discussion by posing questions that included, “What types of adversity are there?” and “How does adversity affect performance?”. During this brainstorming session, some athletes began to talk among themselves, and I raised my voice above their mutterings to make myself heard. Instead of taking my rise in volume as a sign to be quiet, the athletes’ chatter grew louder. Against this background noise my voice began to feel strained, and I realized I was fighting against it. Knowing it was useless to pit my one voice against fifty others; I stopped, and waited for everyone to be quiet. Athletes who had been fully engaged in the workshop held a finger to their lips saying “shhh”. I started to feel uneasy simply waiting, but I held

my ground and everyone eventually became quiet. Standing up at the front, it had felt like several minutes before the athletes settled down and refocused however in reality it was only a few seconds. I had regained everybody's attention but I was concerned interest in the workshop had waned due to the interruption.

At the end of the workshop I was disappointed to see that the athletes seemed in a hurry to escape. Chairs they had been sitting on were upturned in their rush to leave, and worksheets I had given out lay crumpled on the floor. I sat on the stage deflated and my supervisor, Angus, came over for a session debrief. I was bitterly disappointed that the workshop had not gone smoothly, and I fear it showed. Angus, who had been observing, offered some advice, "You need to find other ways to engage them". I nodded, knowing he was right, but I was not sure what to change and how. I fought the desire to be totally honest and ask him what I should do. Instead, I assured Angus I would try to be more creative in my workshop the next day.

Reflecting on Angus's comments that evening, I realized how important it was for me to present myself to him in a certain way. I felt that it was in my best interests to continuously display a high level of competence and demonstrate that I could address any issues successfully on my own. I thought admitting I wanted more specific help might indicate a weakness in my abilities as a consultant and harm my credibility. This concern was amplified by knowing that one day I might be reliant on him for a job or reference.

The next morning I searched the internet for a "hook" to facilitate athlete engagement in my workshop. I soon realized I was using the same ineffective approach to preparation as the previous day. I was not willing to repeat the previous day's workshop where I fought to be heard and at times struggled to maintain athlete attention. Although I still harbored concerns that revealing my weaknesses would harm my credibility, I decided to ask Angus for guidance to facilitate the development of my ability to structure and deliver more effective workshops.

I went to Angus's office, and knocked on his door, but when I entered I only found Thomas. I had prepared to speak to Angus and hesitated at first, but decided I was there to get help and proceeded to ask Thomas. "Hey Thomas, I'm having trouble over today's workshop." He looked up "I tend to tell stories, you know. The kids love to know about real life, what people have done." Excited by his own suggestion he began telling tales from the sporting world. "Lance Armstrong: cycling up a mountain for eight hours a day until he gets it right. Pete Sampras: life sacrifices in order to be Wimbledon champion at 18. Maria Sharapova: aged 12 turning up to practice 15 minutes early just so she's warm and ready to train. And take time telling them. Draw the stories out, to draw the athletes in." "I'm never going to remember all this," I said. Thomas was already holding a pad of paper and pen out to me.

That afternoon, I felt more confident going into my workshop. I had researched Thomas's stories further and cherry-picked the one that would reinforce my workshop's overriding topic of quality practice. Instead of asking a question that had yielded only silence the previous day, I began by telling a story. As I began to introduce a well-known personality of the athletes' sport, I immediately noted a level of engagement I had not received previously: athletes were actively listening sitting slightly forward with their eyes fixed on me as I walked around the space, and no one was talking (or even whispering) to their neighbor. After the work-

shop, the athletes filed out of the room. Seats remained in regimented rows, work-sheets tucked into sports bags, and pencils returned. As I went to collect my things I found a note at the edge of the stage. Covering the whole of an A4 page was written “GREAT JOB”. I felt overwhelmed: happy, relieved, and with a real sense of belief that I could actually do this.

Critical Incident 2

The second incident describes the impact of hearing about one supervisor’s, Peter, own developmental journey. The incident contextualizes and demonstrates the theme of anxiety which is normalized through hearing about similar uncertainties my supervisor had faced. How Peter overcame these uncomfortable times helped me to develop my self-awareness of being a performer based on a balanced appreciation of my strengths and weaknesses as a consultant. Following this honest self-appraisal, I developed a self-directed learning strategy that further illustrates the theme of being a learner, through the development of specific goals to address weaker areas based on a foundation of previous accomplishments. The theme practical content is also highlighted through Peter’s sharing of tools and techniques that make up the content of his applied practice. Finally, the time given by Peter outside of formal supervision sessions and his honest self-disclosure had a beneficial impact on our supervisory relationship as I appreciated that he could relate to what I felt and was genuinely supportive of, and invested in, my development.

Understanding Another’s Developmental Journey (Day 39). During my internship I had seen athletes gravitate toward one of the internship supervisor’s, Peter. After workshops, athletes would approach him seeking further guidance, and others had publically proclaimed his work as a consultant. I wanted to learn what he did, and how he had developed such a great reputation; so when he came into our office to talk to all of the interns one evening I grabbed a pen and paper, ready to capture some of the essence of his approach that may help my own practice.

Instead of starting with his current work, Peter took us back to when he was an enthusiastic intern with a professional mountain to climb. Step-by-step he described his developmental journey, and painted a picture of how he harnessed his strengths and overcame his weaknesses. I was surprised to hear that Peter had once been insecure about one-on-one sessions. I had recently observed Peter working with an athlete where he had come across self-assured and at ease with his client. To hear that he had once been unsure of his abilities helped me to recognize that perhaps it’s alright not to always be confident during early periods of consulting. Moreover, Peter described how he deliberately developed his weaker areas, until feelings of uncertainty were eventually replaced by composed confidence. I began to see that being unsure and sometimes hesitant about an aspect of practice was not necessarily an indication that I would not go on to be an effective professional, and should be interpreted as a sign to be proactive in finding ways to improve skills in that area.

Peter illustrated to me that the nature and source of discomfort can be quite different between people. I considered the reasons why I had sometimes felt uncomfortable during the internship, and compared those to my peers. Sometimes

it is easy to feel that you are the only one who is experiencing nerves going into applied situations. However, from what Peter said, I realized that we all were confronted by challenges of some sort at some point.

Peter explained that during times of uncertainty, he had drawn reassurance from areas he considered to be his strengths, such as conducting workshops. Peter had the ability to effectively communicate to athlete groups who would give him their undivided attention. He emphasized the importance to reinforce his strengths to maintain a level of efficacy.

Peter continued to describe his developmental journey, bringing athletes in and out of focus as he recreated the montage of jerseys and signed photographs that decorated his office wall. Along the way he shared applied tips and techniques, which I enthusiastically scribbled down for future use.

Reflecting on Peter's session a day later, I appreciated my desire to capture tangible tools for applied practice had missed his point, and *the* point, entirely. The applied methods I could grab and use were just tools that could be used well or not so well. Instead of focusing on the practical content, Peter had emphasized the need to know himself better, to understand how he could best develop as a consultant. I now recognized the need to develop "me", and to do that I had to understand myself better. Previously I had thought about my strengths and weaknesses but in truth, this was only ever about weaknesses. I realized I was continuously focusing on areas I had found wanting, and rarely if ever gained confidence from what I did well. Consequently, my levels of anxiety were kept elevated. I wondered how my strengths and weaknesses would look like if I mapped them out with a sport psychologist. If I was that sport psychologist, would I say it was good practice to concentrate on weaknesses only? I resolved that if I wanted to be a professional then I had to approach the exercise with myself professionally, attending to my strengths and weaknesses in equal measure.

To maintain a balanced and systematic approach to identifying my strengths and weaknesses I reread my reflective diary. Comments in my diary showed a constant concern to develop positive working relationships with clients (Petitpas et al., 1999), yet feedback from my supervisor identified this to be a strength. My focus on developing good rapport using nonjudgmental listening and appropriate eye contact and body language, diverted my attention from other factors important for fostering a productive working alliance, such as critical listening skills through reflective responses. By reading my reflections on supervisor feedback, I increased my awareness of what I did well and allowed me to be more self-assured when focusing on what I could do better.

When Peter had offered to share his experiences, I had wanted to capture the essence of his good practice. I realized now that in a roundabout way I had—it just wasn't what I thought it would be. Professional development requires learning about yourself and to do this you need to treat yourself as fairly as any client. This marked a change in the way I monitored my competencies as a consultant. No more constantly focusing on weaknesses; instead asking simple questions "what did I do well?" and "what can I do better?"

Critical Incident 3

The final critical incident briefly describes two individual sessions demonstrating how my interpretation of athlete feedback affected levels of anxiety and confidence.

Being able to control these affective states in front of clients demonstrates the theme of being a performer. In the same way that emotions can impact an athlete's performance, they can influence consultant effectiveness, and need to be managed accordingly. Building a good working relationship with clients is also shown to be a potential challenge if it fluctuates with their successes and failures with sport psychology techniques. The relationship and the feelings it produces must be managed appropriately.

Client Feedback And Affective States—Session 1 (Day 11) George came in and sat down for our final session. I noticed he had come straight from training as sweat trickled down his tired face. I wondered whether he would have preferred to postpone the session and have a chance to shower, but aware of our limited time together I decided to press ahead.

Earlier that day, I had reviewed notes from our previous sessions. I felt our initial meeting had been difficult. My questions had been too closed (“So, how long have you been playing?”) and George had offered one word responses (“Forever!”). I had continued to ask introductory questions until my mind went blank and I couldn't think of anything else to say. Cocoons in my stomach morphed into full butterflies of anxiety and threatened to take control of me and the session. I was fearful that George could tell that I was a little lost, and this would weaken my credibility with him and reduce the chance of any beneficial impact of our sessions. I then remembered a goal setting exercise that Angus had used previously, and guided George through it. Getting the focus on George's needs seemed to open up a new line of communication between us. From this start our working alliance developed over the week, and we now began what was to be our final session.

George turned to me, and locked his eyes onto mine for the first time. “It worked!” He smiled. “I was consistent. Just one little mistake. Amazing really!” I was thrilled for George. I hadn't expected such a positive response so soon, and my confidence as a practitioner grew inside. Aware not to overtly display my inner thoughts, I refocused back to listen to George's story.

Before George left, he thanked me and said “It's because of you.” I encouraged him to recognize himself as the one who had made the change and performed better. Nevertheless, I was elated by George's positive feedback and couldn't wait to reflect on the session with Angus who confirmed my delight explaining, “Moments like that make it all worthwhile.”

During the internship, feedback had presented itself in many guises, but nothing had surpassed affirmation from a client. I felt happy because he had achieved a real success, and a new confidence danced inside me going into one-on-one consultations. However, there are two sides to every coin and different types of client feedback.

Client Feedback and Affective States—Session 2 (Day 30) My final client of the week put her head round the intern office door. “Come in Fiona”, I smiled “How was your day?” “Fine.” She answered. Fiona's reluctance to elaborate made me feel like we were getting nowhere fast. My confidence began to waver, but instead of allowing anxious thoughts to develop I tried to refocus and encouraged Fiona to reflect on a technique we had introduced two days before. “Did you try those things we talked about?” Fiona nodded. “And did you find they helped?”

My question was answered with a quiet “I’m not sure.” I knew if she doubted the efficacy of the technique then she may disengage with the process altogether. My confidence began to dissipate further into feelings of insecurity. I tried to reassure her that sport psychology was not about finding a quick fix, and the new techniques she had learnt would take time and practice to master, just like physical skills.

At the end of the session, we said farewell, but I wondered whether I had made a difference, and not knowing left me feeling uneasy. My hope going into every consultation was that I could facilitate a positive change. However, I was beginning to appreciate that I may not receive sufficient feedback to know whether I succeed in this hope. Although I need to tune in to athletes and be responsive to their feedback, ambiguous feedback is not an unequivocal sign of consultant ineffectiveness, but may be interpreted in many other ways, such as the client is tired or not feeling well.

My levels of confidence seemed to be tied to client feedback and were overly dependent on external sources. My professional confidence must be built on more solid foundations, such as input from supervisors, peers, and perhaps most importantly self-reflection. Just as important was the realization that a consultation with a relatively low sense of achievement or success could easily falter my confidence and have negative implications for subsequent client interactions. A good working relationship is aided by understanding what clients feel, and not feeling it (too much) myself.

The Bigger Picture, Integrated Practice and Pragmatic Issues

Three themes that emerged from my diary have not been illustrated through the critical incidents: the bigger picture, integrated practice, and pragmatic issues. The theme of the bigger picture relates to the need to maintain a holistic perspective in applied practice. Getting to know the person, rather than just the athlete, allows for a greater understanding of social context within which they live and train. For example, one client did not want to focus on her sport and “there [were] obviously other more important things in her life that she cares more about, and I [could] work the applied skills in relation to that.” This understanding enables me to match my input to client needs, which may go beyond merely PST for performance enhancement.

Integrated practice reflects the positive developmental influence I found from interactions and developing working relationships with coaches. The importance of integrated practice was illustrated by my work with a golfer from whom I gathered that “his coach [was] also working on his routine. I investigate...further, as I [didn’t] want him . . . dealing with conflicting information”. Integrating my practice with a coach facilitated my ability to feel comfortable observing training sessions, learn specific psychological demands of their sport, integrate psychological interventions into practice and gain invaluable coach support for PST.

A typical definition of a professional is someone who practices for livelihood or money. Stemming from several pragmatic issues during the internship, I learnt how service can be promoted and marketed, and gained the “opportunity to practice describing what we do as sport psychologists”. There are important ethical and professional issues that neophytes need to understand. I found it useful to

learn how service and terms should be agreed. Guidelines and codes of conduct are not necessarily the same across different bodies (e.g., BASES and the British Psychological Society differ on guidance relating to using testimonials in service advertising). My internship experiences highlighted the importance of understanding the need to attend to the business of being a professional.

Reflections From My “Go To” Supervisor

This research is based around a reflective journal which is a key element in maximizing learning from the internship experience. For example, Critical Incident 2 was not preplanned nor specifically part of supervision but the neophyte reflections seem to make the incident critical, facilitating important learning. As a result of this research we now organize a more structured method of self-reflection based on the framework offered by BASES-supervised experience documentation. There is still flexibility for interns to bring and use other models of reflection but adopting one is a requirement.

One of the primary issues in all incidents seems to be recognizing and ameliorating the sense of anxiety and at the same time protecting and developing self-confidence. Critical Incident 2 illustrates there can be significant differences between people so it is important not to make assumptions about what is stressful for a person but to observe and listen to them. It seems that the *immersion* approach, which characterizes a significant part of our internship program, provides an intensive and challenging opportunity to both the supervisor and supervisee. In some respects, this immersion approach is analogous to being a lifeguard: we encourage interns to try swimming first but we let them know we will not let them drown. Critical Incident 1 provides an example where the intern was challenged to find alternative ways to engage the audience. The example illustrates the line between empowering an intern to generate their own solutions and a need for the supervisor to provide clear suggestions and support. Every professional inevitably gets to a point in their training when they must actually do the job, and they are likely to have both good and not so good performances. We judge this point carefully through rigorous recruitment and selection, following significant periods of education and training. However, feelings of anxiety and dips in confidence when things do not go so well are still likely to occur as Critical Incident 1 shows. With support and supervision that focuses on making adaptive developmental changes, these episodes can be managed effectively and perceived lack of success can be a real driver for positive change. Just as important is getting interns to realize that they already know many ways to help themselves perform as sport psychologists. The very same skills they may have studied to enhance athlete performance can, and should, be used for their own performance. In this regard, I strongly advocate “practicing what you preach”, epitomized in the theme being a performer.

The nature of the supervisory relationship is shown by the incidents to be very important. There are times when a “go to” supervisor is required for each intern (e.g., Critical Incident 1); however there are many benefits of being able to offer supervisions from a team. The different perspectives enable interns to contrast approaches and styles and helps them recognize the need to develop their own style and not emulate that of a single supervisor. Showing the interns that their development is important, for example by investing extra time and elements

of self disclosure (see Critical Incident 2) are ways in which the supervisory relationship can be enhanced. However, the threat to this relationship in terms of managed impression is very real and understandable. In Critical Incident 1, the neophyte struggled with the conflicting needs to impression manage and seek supervision, even though supervisors were available and encouraged questions beyond formal exchanges. This can easily create a “blind spot” for supervisors who believe that they are approachable, highlighting the importance of supervisees perceptions and cautions against supervisors making assumptions.

Steps may be taken to help mitigate against the threat impression management has to the supervisory relationship that include providing clear initial supervisory orientation, and cultivating peer support with trainees. Critical Incident 2 also illustrated the benefits of understanding how other practitioners have learned from their experiences. Since this research was completed, we now hold a regular weekly forum for reflective practice with interns and supervisors. Providing a setting for open and honest self-reflection, and encouraging and modeling it ourselves as supervisors, will help to promote adaptive learning strategies with interns and hopefully foster greater trust between supervisee and supervisor.

There can be many advantages to group supervision, with both more supervisors and supervisees, but we recognize that it is not essential for training and using it needs to be weighed against time cost and balanced with the need for one-to-one supervision. Furthermore, unlike the internship described here, many supervisees receive supervision in situations where other supervisors and supervisees may not be available. However an important factor not captured by the incidents is the reciprocal development that occurs in the supervisory relationship. Supervision exposes supervisors to new ideas and perspectives, challenges their approach and techniques and enhances their own reflection. Recognizing the contributory role of supervision in ongoing continuing professional development may encourage more professionals to participate and enable wider use of team supervision.

General Discussion

The study identified 11 key themes in the learning experiences of a neophyte sport psychologist in a 9-week internship. Eight themes were illustrated in context through critical incidents. The neophyte’s experience of these themes together with supervisor insights furthers our understanding of important factors, and indicates recommendations to ensure quality training for professional development.

This study supports Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) contention that neophytes are likely to experience perceived uncertainty and the quality of the supervisory relationship will encourage a positive developmental approach. Supervisors’ self-disclosure and commitment to neophyte development can both normalize and reassure neophyte practitioners (Tod et al., 2007). Supervisors work with supervisees is not dissimilar to working with clients who need to control emotions and concerns to perform. Equally, supervisees should be encouraged to treat their own development in the same way as they would a client with balanced appraisals, seeing challenges over threats, approaching key relationships with open honesty and ensuring self-reflections to enhance learning and to moderate external influences to confidence.

Stepping up to professional practice is a time of uncertainty and doubt. While good developmental preparation, training and support are necessary when a practitioner starts the first group workshop on his or her own, there is sense of immersion—it is really happening and they are expected to complete it. These points are critical periods for learning and development. In counseling, Worthen and McNeill (1996) found that when supervisees stepped out of their comfort zones (prompting anxiety) positive developmental change could be promoted if the experiences were coupled with an optimal supervisory relationship.

The development of good quality supervisory relationships is essential for quality neophyte professional development (Silva et al., 1999). Thorough and explicit neophyte orientation from the outset, clear communication lines, demonstrating commitment to supervisee development and encouraging and modeling honest self-reflection are all ways in which this key relationship can be enhanced. A good quality supervisory relationship is instrumental in fostering a developmental approach to experiences during this stage of professional development (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

It is understandable, and to a degree expected, to see that impression management is an issue for neophyte professionals performing just as it is for athletes (James & Collins, 1997). Impression management is a real threat to the quality of the supervisory relationship; self-disclosure, openness and explicit orientation, professional practice meetings for these processes to occur, and supervisory teams could help further counter the need to impression manage.

Consistent with other work (e.g., Holt & Strean, 2001), the process of self-reflection significantly augmented learning and should be considered good practice for professional development. In the counseling literature (e.g., Skovholt, Rønnestad, & Jennings, 1997), reflective practice has been described as synonymous with the theory of deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993) in promoting domain specific growth.

Recommendations from this research are balanced by including supervisor and supervisee perspectives. The benefits of group supervisions and teams of supervisors are demonstrated, but such processes cannot be mandatory without prejudicing those working in situations where these are not available. Equally, the time cost for quality supervision needs to be weighed against the reality of professional demands for those acting as supervisors. The reciprocal benefit of supervision and recognition of the impact on continuous professional development may encourage more participation. To ensure that plausible and balanced recommendations can be made, it is important for future research to retain the contextual richness made available through this and preceding work on neophyte development. Although the transferability of single case incidents may be questioned, prolonged periods of observation and systematic analysis to determine critical incidents, as employed in this study, can enhance credibility of the work. Furthermore, investigators should consider the implications of shared versus private reflections and their impact on features surrounding professional development, such as developing an optimal supervisory dyad. To facilitate a warts and all account in the current study, the neophyte conducted reflections in solitude. This methodological decision may have restricted professional development processes

promoted by shared reflections with supervisors and peers (e.g., Knowles et al., 2007). Finally, an increased focus on supervisors is encouraged in future research, so it remains balanced with neophyte perspectives.

Neophyte practitioners almost inevitably operate in situations that are daunting and complex. Quality supervision can maximize developmental opportunities, through organizing appropriate self-reflection, fostering a developmental approach through optimal supervisory relationship and responding to perceived failings and neophyte anxiety in a way that is supportive but that also stimulates learning and development.

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