**Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching: The influence of Positive Psychology**

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**Introduction**

With one of the aims of this book being to explore the benefits that Positive Psychology offers sport and physical activity, this chapter focuses on sport coaching and the innovative concept of Positive Pedagogy (PPed) for sport coaching (Light, 2017). This is a concept I have been developing in practice and theorizing over the past five years (Light, 2014a, 2014b; Light & Harvey, 2015) but which originates in my early attempts to inform coaching individual sports with a constructivist perspective on learning (eg Light & Wallian, 2008). PPed for sport coaching draws on Antonovsky’s (1979) work on the origins of health and well-being and Positive Psychology to extend the positive experiences and learning that game based approaches (GBA) can generate in team sports to sport more broadly. In particular, it aligns with Seligman’s (2012) PERMA model that allows it to emphasize meaning, achievement and relationships as well as positive emotions and engagement that seem to get more attention in the literature on Positive Psychology.

PPed modifies the core pedagogical features I have identified for the Game Sense approach to coaching team sports, as a GBA that is widely used in sport coaching (Jones, 2015; Light, 2013), to enable their application to coaching beyond team sports. GBAs focus on the game as a whole to contextualize learning and enhance the transfer of improvement in practice to the game on the field (Jones, 2015). They focus on empowering the athlete as an active learner in contrast to traditional approaches that break the game up into discrete parts, such as technique, that are drilled out of the context of the game. PPed is underpinned by constructivist perspectives on learning and draws on the work of medical sociologist, Anton Antonovsky and Positive Psychology to emphasise the positive nature of experience and learning. Recently I have focused more on the PERMA model (Seligman, 2012) to provide a framework for promoting positive experience and learning and well-being which is developing as a stronger focus for the approach (Light, 2017).

The Positive Pedagogy approach redresses the need in the sport psychology, physical education and sport coaching literatures for more attention to be paid to enjoyment, excitement, friendship and meaning in sport that is highlighted in the introduction to this book. Like Positive Education, it draws on Positive Psychology but to less of an extent with the primary focus being on pedagogy and developing performance.

I am not a psychologist but the multi-disciplinary approach I take in my research on coaching and learning in sport draws significantly on the psychology and sport psychology literatures. This chapter provides an example of the influence that Positive Psychology is having in fields beyond psychology.

**The development of Positive Pedagogy**

The physical education and sport coaching literatures has seen sustained interest over the past two decades by researchers and practitioners in GBAs as an alternative to a traditional ‘skill-drill’ approach that reduces the complexity of team sports to a number of fundamental skills or techniques. As Bunker and Thorpe noted in the presentation of their Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), traditional approaches improve skill but do not lead to better game play while also taking the enjoyment and interaction out of team sports (Bunker and Thorpe, 1982; Light, 2013). They have been shown to be effective in improving performance, increasing motivation, enhancing interpersonal relationships, boosting confidence, promoting positive experiences of learning and contributing toward wellbeing (Light, 2013). Despite these positive outcomes and the ongoing development of a range of GBAs, the application of their pedagogical features beyond team sports has been limited (Light, Curry and Mooney, 2014) and this is something that I have been working on with colleagues over the past eight years (Light and Wallian, 2008; Light, 2014a; Light and Harvey, 2015). Positive Pedagogy extends the pedagogical features of GBAs such as Game Sense (Light, 2013) beyond team games to individual sports while drawing on Antonovsky’s work and Positive Psychology to promote positive learning experiences and outcomes (Light, in press; Light and Harvey, 2015).

While GBAs focus on improving performance, their athlete centred and inquiry-based pedagogy fosters positive experiences of learning and a range of positive social, moral and personal development as a type of ‘secondary’ and typically implicit learning (Dyson, 2005; Sheppard and Mandigo, 2005). However, as Harvey, O’Donovan and Kirk (2014) contend, rather than being automatically ‘caught’, this learning must be ‘taught’. It must be an intended outcome of coaching and teaching.

Beginning with a brief outline of Positive Pedagogy’s three core features, this chapter moves on to focus on how I have integrated Positive Psychology into my development of Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching and physical education.

**Positive Pedagogy as a holistic approach**

PPed sits upon the philosophic principle of holism (Light, 2017) and the idea that complex phenomena can only be explained and understood as a whole. In epistemology, holism contrasts with reductionism and the view that complex systems can be explained through reducing them to their component parts. This holistic approach is assisted by drawing on monist, Eastern philosophic traditions to circumnavigate some of the tensions arising from Western, mind-body dualism as has been explained by others (see, Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991). Positive Psychology also draws on elements of Eastern philosophic traditions such as its appropriation of the Buddhist concept of *mindfulness* thatCohen (2010) describes as the ‘psychologicalisation’ of Buddhism with the concept of flow resonating with an Eastern, holistic world view.

In Buddhism the concept of mindfulness refers to a state of awareness of the individual’s being and doing (Cohen, 2010) that has some relevance to putting PPed into practice (Light, 2014b, 2017) but more in the vein of its original Buddhist meaning than as a coping mechanism. Csikszentmihayli’s (1990) concept of *flow* resonates with Eastern philosophic traditions and concepts such as the Japanese concept of *mushin* (Light, 2014b) have informed the holistic principles of PPed by emphasizing the inseparability of mind from body, from spirit (Light, 2014b).

PPed offers an understanding of athlete experience in competition and practice that mimics competition intensity and lies in contrast to reductionist and dualistic approaches to coaching that emphasise drilling technique out of the context of the game - in the case of team sports. It also generates positive emotions such as enjoyment or delight (Kretchmar, 2005), engagement in learning, the building of relationships and a sense of belonging (Light, 2008, 2016; Chen and Light, 2006), meaning, and opportunities for individual and collective achievement to align with the PERMA model of well-being. Positive Pedagogy emphasizes what the learner *can* do and how s/he can draw on existing individual and social resources to meet learning challenges through reflection and dialogue.

**Core features of Positive Pedagogy**

The Positive Pedagogy framework has three core features that require the coach: (1) designing and managing experience of engagement with the physical learning environment, (2) asking questions in preference to telling athletes what to do and, (3) adopting an inquiry-based approach. My use of engagement in this chapter refers to learning that involves the curiosity, interest, and the intellectual, emotional and physical commitment needed to maximize learning and the links between non-cognitive factors such as motivation, interest, determination and perseverance and conscious cognition (Newman, 1992).

***Designing and managing the learning environment/experience***

The focus on the whole game in GBA such as Game Sense is evident in PPed for individual sports as a whole-person approach that involves all the senses and other dimensions of experience such as ‘feel’ in swimming (Light, 2014a). Typically, learning experiences aimed at achieving specific outcomes are encouraged by placing physical constraints on the athlete such as performing butterfly with one arm in swimming to focus attention on the kick or running with the hands held behind the back to focus on the use of the arms (Light, 2017; 2014b). As similar as it may seem, this is different to Constraints-Led Theory (CLT) due to the different aims of the constraint with CLT developed from motor learning theory and sitting upon empiricist epistemology with PPed informed by constructivist epistemology. In PPed the aim of imposing a restraint (seen in CLT as a physical constraint) is not to produce a predetermined movement or movement pattern but, instead, to create problems to be solved by the athlete through processes of non-conscious thinking or adaptation (doing) and conscious thinking promoted through questioning and interaction. In individual sports that are typically skill-intensive, this involves discovery learning (Bruner, 1961) in which the athlete discovers the most efficient way for them to perform a skill or technique through problem solving. Whwn using PPed for coaching individual sports, constraints are used to highlight or create a problem that is to be solved through interaction and active learning that would normally involve formulating, testing and evaluating solutions. Although the end result could well look the same as it would when using a constraints-led approach, the learning process is different with PPed also acknowledging the importance of learning how to learn.

When a coach introduces a new group or an individual athlete to the indirect coaching methods of PPed he should begin with a more ‘traditional’ approach that the athletes are accustomed to and gradually move toward more empowering methods (Light, 2017). As athletes adapt to the approach they can take on more autonomy, ownership and responsibility for participating in the design, modification and evaluation of learning activities. This leads to increasing empowerment through a growing understanding of the activity and of how to learn. As players/athletes adapt and become more prepared to engage in purposeful social interaction, they rely less upon the coach and begin to take more responsibility for their own learning which is a positive developmental experience. This typically involves a coach-athlete relationship that is more equitable in the repositioning of the coach from a director of learning to a facilitator of it and the empowerment of the athlete.

***Ask questions to generate dialogue and thinking***

There is a range of challenges that coaches and teachers typically have to meet when taking up athlete-centred, inquiry-based approaches such as Positive Pedagogy and GBA. These include designing and managing practice games and moving from being a director of learning to a facilitator, but the literature on GBA consistently identifies coach and teacher questioning as the most challenging aspect of adopting these athlete-centred approaches (Harvey and Light, 2015). Questioning is one of the central mechanisms employed for promoting learning in Positive Pedagogy and GBA but typically presents challenges for coaches and teachers (Forrest, 2014; Harvey and Light, 2015; Roberts, 2011; Wright and Forrest, 2007). In Positive Pedagogy questions vary between situations and sports, but are not posed to get answers. They are asked to promote thinking, reflection and dialogue and/or to assist in the discovery of effective technique although it takes time for coaches to become skilful enough with questioning to achieve these aims. Where possible questions should stimulate a range of possible answers or solutions rather than leading athletes to predetermined answers. Of course this can vary when coaching a skill or skill-intensive individual sport due to the focus on understanding established principles of movement or technique efficiency and the smaller range of response options available when compared to the greater complexity of game play in team sports (Light and Harvey, 2015). There may also be times when there is a predetermined ‘answer’ or most effective technique that the athlete is encouraged to discover.

Although questions asked in PPed can be designed to help athletes discover pre-determined knowledge, it requires coaches to have a disposition toward promoting divergent thinking, creativity and a sense of curiosity. When a solution developed by an athlete does not work the PPed coach would usually ask him/her to reflect upon why it did not work and how it could be modified to work or decide it cannot work and to seek a different solution. This could be in a small group or in a one-on-one situation between coach and athlete. It is ‘solution-focused’ which allows it to provide a positive experience by focusing athlete attention on the goals of the activity and what they can do to achieve these goals (Clarke and Dembowski, 2006; Grant, 2011). Here the athlete solves problems by drawing on the resources (including social) available with discussions focused on solutions to keep the athlete(s) engaged in the task (Grant, 2011).

***An inquiry-based approach to athlete learning***

PPed adopts an inquiry-based approach in which productive interaction is of central importance for learning. This helps athletes improve while developing confidence in their ability to become independent learners and problem-solvers and so remain motivated to participate in the activity for the longer term (Renshaw, Oldham and Bawden, 2012). The productive social interaction involved in this process can also lead to athletes understanding each other in humanistic ways. It can encourage empathy, compassion, meaningful relationships, a sense of connection and care for each other. In PPed coaches build an environment in which athletes feel secure. This involves coaches making it clear that mistakes provide opportunities for learning (Renshaw *et al*., 2012) and can be seen as positive learning experiences with the provision of opportunities for adequate reflection and analysis.

**Enhancing positive experience**

The three core features of Positive Pedagogy encourage positive learning experiences that are enhanced by drawing on Antonovsky’s Salutogenic Theory and Sense of Coherence (SoC) model (1979, 1987) and Positive Psychology with a growing focus on the PERMA model as a guide for providing positive experiences of learning (Seligman, 2012).

***Salutogenic Theory*** *(ST)*

In PPed I use the three features of Antonovsky’s SoC model to help make athlete learning positive by making practice comprehensible, manageable and meaningful (Light and Harvey, 2015). Antonovsky’s ST and SoC model (1979, 1987) focus on the socially constructed resources that facilitate attaining and maintaining good health and are used in PPed to provide conditions in practice that both enhance learning and contribute to the athlete’s well-being. Antonovsky’s focus on experience offers coaches a way of working with an holistic focus on the affective and social dimensions of sport that are emphasised in athlete-centred approaches (Kidman and Lombardo, 2010; Light, 2013) instead of taking a purely cognitive approach. Antonovsky suggests that good health and wellbeing emerge from the individual feeling that life has: a) comprehensibility, b) manageability and, c) meaningfulness. In PPed these concepts are used to create conditions that promote positive experiences of learning that I briefly describe below.

*Comprehensibility* is developed through experience and refers to the extent to which things make sense for the individual by being ordered and consistent. For learning to be *comprehensible* in sportit should help athletes’ know, not only *how* to do something, but also *when*, *where* and *why*. It should also foster deep understanding of the concepts or ‘big ideas’ (Fosnot, 1996) that underpin learning and performance in sport (Light, 2017). Comprehensive understanding in sport involves not only rational, conscious and articulated knowing, but also a practical understanding or ‘sense’ of the game or activity (Bourdieu,1986) developed through experience and engagement in the unfolding of knowledge.

*Manageability* is the extent to which an individual feels s/he can manage stress and challenge by having the resources at hand to do so. In PPed this includes the resources available from interaction within groups and teams and/or the whole team in dialogue and the ‘debate of ideas’ (Gréhaigne, Richard and Griffin, 2005). In Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching the athlete should feel that the challenges of learning are manageable and can be met by drawing on individual resources (for example, skill, physical capacity, knowledge and/or social resources such as social interaction with peers and the teacher/coach that are emphasised in Positive Pedagogy.

*Meaningfulness* refers to how much the individual feels that life makes sense and that its challenges are worthy of commitment and there is a useful overlap here with Seligman’s (2012) PERMA model. When activities engage athletes affectively and socially as well as physically and intellectually they are more likely to be meaningful for them. For example, when a swim coach adopts PPed s/he might ask the swimmer to reflect upon the feel of his/her stroke and discuss it with a training partner who provides an external, objective perspective that can be drawn on along with the swimmer’s subjective perspective. In this example learning emerges from interaction between the two athletes and the sharing of two different perspectives. This should involve them linking its technical detail to one of the core concepts of reducing resistance or increasing propulsion. This not only promotes physical, affective, intellectual and physical engagement in learning but also gives meaning to practice through deep understanding of *why* a technique is performed as it is. It empowers the swimmer to work through problems and challenges as they arise (Light, 2014a).

**The PERMA model**

Positive Psychology’s focus on the positive aspects of life complements the positive experiences encouraged by the athlete-centred, inquiry-based pedagogy of PPed and the three elements of Antonovosky’s (1979, 1987) SoC model. My understanding of Positive Psychology is that it sets out to redress a preoccupation of psychology with pathologies and repairing the ‘worst aspects’ of life by discovering and promoting its positive qualities (Seligman and Csikszentmihayli, 2000). It focuses on encouraging wellbeing by focusing on what is good about life and what the individual can do to make life better. It aims to promote satisfaction in the past, happiness and the experience of *flow* in the present and hope and optimism in the future (Jackson and Csikszentmihayli, 1999). All these features of Positive Psychology align with the aims of Positive Pedagogy but it is the PERMA model (Seligman, 2012) that frames the intent of PPed to promote positive experiences and learning.

PPed does not have a specific focus on developing well-being or happiness but does aim to foster positive ‘secondary’ learning that can contribute toward well-being. With the importance placed on meaning, relationships, achievement and sense-making in PPed it aligns well with all five elements of Seligman’s (2012) PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relations, meaning and achievement) model as a guide for promoting well-being. This association with PERMA is becoming more apparent in my research and thinking on the implementation of Positive Pedagogy. Many aspects of the PERMA model influence the ongoing development of Positive Pedagogy with this emerging as an inviting area for further inquiry (Light, 2017). The five elements of the PERMA model are particularly useful for coaches (and teachers) who are interested in the promotion of wellbeing as a major aim such as those working in schools and youth sport.

**Discussion**

Positive Pedagogy maintains a focus on the improvement of performance at any level of competition and aims to foster an enjoyment of learning and confidence in the athlete’s ability to learn (Light, in press), without which performance achievements would be diminished. This can also include what can be considered to be the secondary learning of many of the same positive characteristics that receive attention in Positive Psychology such as compassion, empathy, resilience, self-confidence, creativity, coping ability, health, resilience, and positive well-being. It would also include the moral, ethical and social learning arising from the pedagogy used. While the nature of the athlete-centred pedagogy used in Positive Pedagogy inherently encourages these characteristics, coaches can draw on the orientation of Positive Psychology to enhance this.

For the athlete, having a comprehensive understanding of what s/he is doing and why s/he is doing it can make the practice session, and the season, meaningful and manageable. Being appropriately challenged in ways that produce experiences of flow or *mushin* during the activity of the session and feeling that s/he has what it takes to manage the challenge in practice is likely to generate optimal learning and to make the experience, and outcomes meaningful and enjoyable. In PPed I draw on Positive Psychology to make learning positive but also to assist in realizing the positive social learning and social skills that participation in sport is commonly assumed to deliver but which merely playing sport will not necessarily produce (see, De Martelaer, De Bouw and Struyven, 2013).

The development of well-being, happiness and positive experiences of practice are important issues for coaches to consider for athletes at any age and any level of performance but are typically of more concern for youth sport coaches and physical education teachers. This is because positive states such as delight and joy and satisfaction arising from achievement and a sense of competence make such valuable contributions toward children’s and young people’s experiences of playing sport (Kretchmar, 2005; Kirk, 2005; Light, Curry & Mooney, 2014).

PPed emphasizes the holistic, social nature of learning, and the role that experience, the body and its senses play in athlete learning. It encourages the development of the social skills involved in engaging in purposeful dialogue, a willingness and ability to negotiate and compromise and the understanding of democratic processes involved in making and enacting decision-making while making learning enjoyable.

At a subjective level Positive Psychology’s attention to feeling good and experiencing states such as joy, happiness and wellbeing makes a valuable contribution toward promoting positive experiences of practice for athletes that enhance learning and improvements in performance. The personal qualities identified in Positive Psychology as being needed to lead a ‘good life’ such as human strengths and being future minded are also evident in PPed. These human strengths and the work of Antonovsky and his SoC are recognised in the development of the new Australian Health and Physical Education curriculum. It is future oriented with the strength-based approach being one of its five propositions (Macdonald, 2013) with the salutogenic approach used to understand issues around, and to secure its implementation (McCuaig et al. 2013). The strengths-based approach takes a positive approach to help students deal with adversity by being ‘future focused’ and drawing on the strengths they bring with them to adapt to the challenges they face.

The focus of Positive Psychology at the community level influences PPed by encouraging thinking about creating positive collectives such as the team and the club and how the promotion of learning positive lessons through sport could and should flow on to them. It also builds humanistic relationships between coach and athlete and between pairs, or small groups, of athletes in individual sports (Light, in 2017). The emphasis here on developing characteristics such as tolerance and social responsibility in individuals is of prime importance when coaching children and young people. As educational philosopher, John Dewey (1938), argues education should provide students with experiences in the short term that are immediately valuable for the individual but which also enable them to contribute to society in the long term.

Learning to learn and the positive inclinations toward learning that Positive Pedagogy aims to generate, and some of the social learning that can accompany it, is more likely to transfer into life off the court or sports field than improved sport technique and fitness are. The way in which it can develop a positive inclination toward learning, and the contribution it can make toward wellbeing would clearly be beneficial for children and young people participating in sport. It would be of benefit for improving performance at any level and could make a contribution toward helping elite-level, professional athletes meet the challenges of developing post-playing careers and enhance their wellbeing.

Along with other innovative developments in coaching over the past few decades Positive Pedagogy challenges the reductionist and objectivist nature of traditional approaches to sport coaching that have dominated for so long. The contemporary GBAs such as Game Sense that Positive Pedagogy builds on are beginning to influence coaching practice across all levels of sport and a wide range of cultural and institutional contexts. This is promising for Positive Pedagogy but the key to its development and ability to influence coaching practice probably lies in having coaches and organisations buy into the philosophical and psychological stances and perspectives of humanism and holism that underpin it. I would also suggest that exploring the ways in which the PERMA model could guide coaches and teachers to make learning more positive and to contribute more effectively to well-being is well worthy of consideration.

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