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Learning as Transformation in the Development of Expertise by Elite Indigenous Australian Athletes

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Abstract

This article addresses the lack of attention paid to research on the development of Indigenous sporting expertise from a socio-cultural perspective. It inquires into the role that informal games played in the development of Australian Indigenous AFL and NRL players up to the age of thirteen. The study adopted a combined narrative inquiry and constructivist grounded theory methodology. The study highlighted the central role that informal games played in the development of expertise and a distinctive Aboriginal style of play shaped by Indigenous culture. This article suggests the central role that informal games shaped by Aboriginal culture played in the development of expertise and an Aboriginal style of play. It also suggests the need for coaching beyond Indigenous players to consider the use of games in training regimes.

Key words: *Indigenous sport, informal games, Australian football, rugby league, Australia, transformative learning*

Introduction

Despite only making up 2.5 percent of the Australian population Indigenous Australians account for ten to fourteen percent of the elite player population in the national rugby league (NRL) and Australian football league (AFL) with up to 35 percent of players in the Australian national rugby league team being Indigenous (Evans, Wilson, Dalton, & Georgakis, 2015). However, views of this ability as a reflection of innate racial qualities fail to recognize Indigenous Australian's achievement (Adair, 2012; Evans et al., 2015). A recent study conducted on the journeys of Indigenous athletes to the AFL and NRL challenges this reductionist view by identifying the participants' development of expertise as a socially and culturally situated process of transformative learning (Light & Evans, 2017, 2018; Light, Evans, & Lavallee, 2017). The concept of transformative learning we use in this article reflects a constructivist view of learning as involving change in the learner and not merely adding on knowledge through a process of interpretation in which the learner draws on his/her existing knowledge and

dispositions to construct new and unique knowledge. We take an holistic view of learning that rejects the division of the mind from the body. This article draws on this study to focus on the pivotal role that informal games played in their development of game sense, creativity and anticipation as deep, embodied learning and hallmarks of Indigenous AFL and NRL players (Hallinan, Bruce & Burke, 2005).

Methods

This study combined constructivist, grounded theory and narrative inquiry methodology aimed at providing an inside perspective and a holistic understanding (Charmaz, 2006; Lal, Suto, & Ungar, 2012). This complemented the importance of story telling in Australian Indigenous culture and helped understand experience in particular socio-cultural settings that facilitated the participants' development of expertise in Australian football and rugby league. Its use of a life history type interview and its emphasis on locating theory within a narrative allowed us to keep the stories intact while identifying



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emerging themes from which to develop theories grounded in the data.

Sixteen Indigenous players participated in the study with eight having played in the AFL and eight in the NRL and were selected using a purposive and snowballing approach. Data were generated using an initial one-hour life history type interview in which the participants were asked to tell their story from their first exposure to their sport to making the AFL or NRL. Analysis of this data identified emerging themes that were explored with two rounds of shorter, semi-structured interviews used to focus on common emerging themes. All names used are pseudonyms and the study was given ethical clearance prior to data collection by The University of Sydney.

Results

We identified three factors that most facilitated the participants' development of talent and expertise up to around the age of thirteen, in order of importance, were (1) informal learning through games, (2) playing a range of other sports, and (3) the socio-cultural environment. In this paper we focus on learning through informal games shaped by culture.

Learning through informal games had the strongest influence on the development of expertise up to the age of twelve to thirteen. Desmond's (NRL) experiences of growing up always "being on a park or playing in the backyard, just constantly for hours and hours" is typical of the stories told to us by the participants in the study. It was intimately tied into the players' social and cultural environments, relationships with significant other people and playing a range of other sports. They did learn from adults and older relatives through some direct instruction and from coaches of teams they played in at school and in their communities as they grew older but learning through participation in informal games as a form of 'deliberate play' made the strongest contribution to their development of expertise as children and to a distinctively Aboriginal approach to play.

Alvin felt that most of what he learned was through playing games on his own and with relatives and friends as learning things that "don't get noticed". After watching local adult games and games on the television he would go out into the back yard where he would kick, anything shaped like a football, that's how bad we were. This (plastic) bottle - it's shape - so we used to kick around two-litre coke bottles, there was always these special little ways to make it a lot more harder so it's better to kick but we just had to be aware, I guess, of hitting the wrong tip of the bottle but we kicked toilet rolls, stubby coasters in the house, put goals everywhere in the yards and that's just how it was.

This provides an example of how the physical and socio-cultural environment the participants in this study grew up in as young Indigenous boys developed creativity through being forced to adapt to constraints in terms of resources available to them. Even when he didn't have any friends to play with Alvin would play on his own for hours, experimenting and testing out ideas on technique: "I'd actually go outside and play footy on my own and I'd kick around and even up until I was a teenager and I found out things for myself, just little things".

All the participants played informal games modified to suit conditions and the resources available such as how many were available to play, the size and shape of the playing space available and in two cases participants mentioned having to

use an empty drink bottle because there was no ball. These games featured most prominently in the stories told of growing up in remote regions and in the Northern Territory in particular. Brent's first experiences of Australian football were playing with cousins and other relatives at ten years of age in informal games after moving to rural Victoria from South Australia: "So that was my first time playing footy and that was just with cousins and family at the time there in 'Hometown' and I didn't make much of it really, it was just a bit of fun and I didn't know the skills too well so I didn't start playing until I was 12 or something like that".

Most participants' stories also suggested the ways in which they felt they learned by watching from an early age. This included watching adults, older boys in the community and older brothers as well as watching AFL and lower leagues on television and watching local league games live. For example, Carl believed that he learned to play most by watching good players and by playing backyard games. He suggested that the knowledge developed through experiences of watching and playing 'backyard games' was enacted without any conscious or rational thinking:

That's where you learn that sort of backyard skills and it just becomes natural, it just all happens and you don't think about it because you're playing with your mates, playing with cousins, you're just enjoying it and it's not really structured. It's just, 'have fun, enjoy yourself' and whether that was in my court or whether it was in my mate's court against his brothers. There was a group of six or seven of us playing against six or seven of them.

When asked about the importance of informal games on his development into an AFL player, Max (AFL) not only suggested their importance for developing expertise through modified games but also through playing other sports. When asked about the role participation in informal games played in his development into an AFL player he said:

I think massive, especially like with soccer and stuff in K-town (Northern Territory) because I had a lot of cousins around me. We were always doing stuff down at the place called the low level and we'd all have barbecues (BBQs) and that and that was it. That's where you learned all your skills, you know, you'd chase your older cousins around and that sort of stuff so I think that was massive in obviously the early development.

Reginald's (NRL) description of learning through games captures the ways in which the participants were typically creative in drawing whatever resources were at hand:

like all our cousins would come together and whether it was a ball or a stick or anything we could get our hands on, if there was a game you could make out of it, we'd look at making a game out of it. So whether it was throwing this or who could make the stick hit the tree or take bark off the tree or hit the hornet's nest or hit the bee's nest or who could stand as closer to the bee's nest and not get stung, sometimes it was quite dangerous, but sometimes we learnt from our mistakes. (Reginald, NRL Interview)

Discussion

Participation in sport for children is typically dominated by 'deliberate play' (Côté, Baker, & Abcrnathy, 2007) and this is evident in this study. In reflecting upon their experiences of learning to play footy as children the participants made lim-

ited reference to being taught how to play. The influence of parents and other adults such as aunts and uncles was strong on the participants' development but not as 'parent coaches'. These significant people did not coach but did provide support and exert a powerful influence upon the development of culture specific 'character' and positive personal traits. They helped the participants develop resilience, fair play, self-control and respect for others, ethical values and staying on track to realize their long-term goals. As children the participants played with older brothers and sometimes 'uncles' but here was little evidence of adults intruding into their games or trying to teach them how to play, as is so common in Western societies (Kerr & Stirling, 2013).

The participants learned to play footy as part of social life in their communities as an example of how "people develop as participants in cultural communities" and how "Their development can be understood only in light of the cultural circumstances of their communities" (Rogoff, 2003). They all learned to play through games that they designed to suit their needs and the resources at hand. They modified footy games to squeeze them into a basketball court or a concrete squash court. They made up simple game-like activities to develop skills in pairs or on their own. When short of a ball two players used an empty plastic drink bottle and developed special techniques for kicking it with bare feet – drawing on their creative resources and growing, practical knowledge of the game enacted in games. In all these modified games the emphasis was not only on developing a challenging contest but also on having fun and enjoying the experience.

Until the age of twelve to thirteen the participants' participation in sport was largely free of adult interference and the imposition of adult values that can kill spontaneity, creativity, joy and freedom in games (Kerr & Stirling, 2013; Light, 2004). This approach to learning also suggests the cultural roots of the creativity, awareness and game sense described by Hallinan, Bruce and Burke (2005) as a 'sixth sense' that Aboriginal AFL and NRL players display. It contrasts with the highly structured approaches to coaching that typically characterise mainstream coaching in Australia and other countries and, which have been criticized for making play predictable and producing players lacking in creativity (Kimber, 2005). In a study on rugby (Light & Evans, 2010) a highly experienced former national rugby coach lamented the demise of learning through informal 'knock up' games and the creativity it produced with his account of learning as a child resonating with the experiences of the participants in this study:

as young Australian boys we learnt our sport by playing our sport and we really didn't have any such thing as coaches. We didn't have any such thing as a field; we didn't have a marked out field. We didn't have any such things as sidelines or for the most part goal posts. We certainly didn't have a referee and at times we didn't even have a ball!

Despite some similarity with the modified games used in games-based teaching and coaching (see, Light, 2013), the informal games through which the participants learned to play footy could be seen more cultural activities located within particular settings and contexts. Indeed, there is a long history of playing games within Aboriginal communities that predates white settlement:

Aboriginal people had a sporting culture before 1788 and played a variety of games that assisted in prepar-

ing young people for their life as hunters and gatherers. Traditional sport incorporated self-reliance, discipline, and instilled the concept of a well-organized group or team approach to life. (Maynard, 2012)

Learning to play footy for the participants was, however, not limited to these informal games because they operate as a cultural practice situated within local communities and larger cultural and social settings. The skills and knowledge that enabled the participants to become elite level players were learned within, and shaped by, the larger field of Aboriginal culture. This specific and identifiable learning was intertwined with broader, implicit cultural learning through participation in the practices of a community and a larger cultural field (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Bourdieu, 1986). The nature of the social and cultural settings within which they learned to play footy as young boys facilitated this learning – whether in the suburbs of Melbourne or Sydney, rural NSW or Victoria, or in an isolated community in the Northern Territory.

Australian Aboriginal AFL and NRL players are seen to be highly skilled with a particular "sense of space and time" (Hallanin et al, 1999) and have been described as being "scintillating, instinctive, naturally talented, magical and having breathtaking flair" (Hallanin et al, 1999). These characteristics of play have typically been passed off as naturally occurring and the "outcome of racial makeup" (Hallanin, et al., 1999) or as them just having the "physical equipment" (Hallanin, et al., 1999) rather than something that is learned and earned (Judd, 2005). The results of the study deawn on in this article challenge such crude and reductionist dismissals of Aboriginal expertise to suggest how they are strongly influenced by participation in the practices of communities as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or apprenticeship learning (Sheets-Johnson, 2000) with an emphasis on learning in and through informal games.

Playing other sports and Aboriginal culture made a contribution toward the participants' development of expertise as children but it is long term participation in informal, self-regulated games, created and modified by the participants that this study suggests most enhanced their development and put them on the road to elite level performance in their sport. It is, however, important to recognise how these games and the transformational learning emerging from them were shaped by the culture of their communities and influenced by broader Aboriginal traditions of interaction, relationships and culture, and the important cultural role that sport plays in contemporary Aboriginal communities.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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