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Continuing the conversation: charting a course for a situated approach to coach education in Australian football

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the benefits, barriers and strategies associated with integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football (soccer). To do so, an interpretivist qualitative research design was used, in which a diverse range of credentialed and experienced Australian football coaches, coach educators, coach education managers, and administrators (n = 28) participated in a series of semi-structured interviews. Participants expressed a strong desire for coach education to be grounded in 'real-world' coaching contexts, alongside the guidance of mentors to afford coaches a richer landscape to learn the 'realities of coaching'. Real-world learning experiences were also deemed to be more meaningful and relevant to coaching practice, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of coaching practice, addressing some of the shortcomings associated with Football Australia's current coach education model. However, participants also identified a number of systemic, institutional and cultural barriers associated with integrating a situated approach, including a perceived lack of value placed on coach education by Football Australia, a 'closed-off' culture in the coaching community and governance issues related to mentorship. Against the backdrop of these challenges, participants were optimistic about the prospects of integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football. As a result, we map out a way forward for a situated approach that focuses on two key strategies: (i) establishing club environments as the primary locus of coach education, and (ii) integrating mentorship as a core pillar of coach education.

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Introduction

Coach education is an important feature of a broader coach development landscape that strives to provide coaches with relevant and valuable learning experiences (Leeder, 2022). Typically functioning as a quality assurance measure, coach education is thought to play a key role, not just in helping to establish a baseline of competence for coaches (Cushion et al., 2010; Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2020; Lyle & Cushion, 2016a), but also in helping to shape key behaviours and practices within the coaching community (Lyle & Cushion, 2016a). However, despite its role within coach development, a growing body of empirical research has been critical of coach education for its apparent inability to promote and support meaningful changes in coaches' learning and practice (Callary & Gearity, 2019; Chesterfield et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2017; Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Watts &

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Cushion, 2017). Considering the significant role that coach education has in supporting the community coaching sector and the mandatory accreditation requirements placed on the vast majority of coaches working in the performance sector, the requirement for sporting National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to deliver effective coach education is critical, especially given the implications it has for coaches, athletes, organisations and the broader sporting community (Judge & Smith, 2023; Lyle & Cushion, 2016b).

Recognising this, Football Australia (FA)[1], recently articulated their intentions of 'creating world-class environments for coach development' in their 2020 strategic document (Football Australia, 2020, p. 32). Within this document, FA proposed a number of promising measures, including plans to modernise coach education delivery and course content to better align with the needs of Australian football coaches (Football Australia, 2020). Yet despite these aspirations, a recent investigation revealed that coach education delivered by FA has been largely ineffective in preparing coaches for the realities of coaching, with coaches citing the abstract nature of course content, along with its delivery in decontextualised settings as major sources of frustration (Selimi et al., 2023). This echoes a broader criticism of coach education that suggests NGBs prioritise regulation and standardisation over acknowledging the rich and diverse contexts within which coaches operate (Nash et al., 2017; Stodter & Cushion, 2014). This misalignment has been compounded through the pedagogical approaches espoused by FA, which have largely not changed since the inception of the National Football Curriculum (NFC) in 2009 (Selimi et al., 2023). Selimi and Woods (2024) attribute this stagnation to a cultural ideology of 'acquisition' woven through FA's coach education model (also see Lave, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991), leading to the view that knowledge is a tangible entity that can be transmitted from expert (i.e. coach educator) to novice (i.e. coach). The pervasive over-reliance of homogenised and prescriptive information within FA's coach education model has deep ties to the metaphoric model of transmission (see Ingold, 2017; Selimi & Woods, 2024). While thought to be providing a foundation of theoretical knowledge, this transmissive model typically fails to address the dynamic, context-dependent and embodied nature of coaching practice (Cushion et al., 2010; Kuklick & Mills, 2023; Leeder, 2022; Nelson et al., 2013).

In response to this criticism, Selimi and Woods (2024) advanced a 'situated approach' to coach education, grounded in the relational concept of 'enskilment' (see Ingold, 2021; Woods et al., 2021). Pioneered by Lave and Wenger (1991), situated learning posits that learning is fundamentally a social process, deeply embedded within specific contexts and communities of practice. Guided by this, in addition to the relational concept of enskilment, Selimi and Woods (2024) proposed a situated approach consisting of three dimensions: (i) exposure to real-world contexts; (ii) legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991); and (iii) mentorship. Here, enskilment can be understood as 'understanding in practice, in which learning is inseparable from doing and in which both are embedded in the context of a practical engagement with the world' (Ingold, 2021, p. 416). Briefly, exposure to real-world contexts underscores the importance of immersing coaches to environments that are representative of the context-specific challenges of their practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Selimi & Woods, 2024; Wood et al., 2023). The second dimension emphasises the importance of legitimately participating within a community of practitioners who 'share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic' (i.e. coaches within a football team) (Wenger, 2002, p. 4). The third dimension speaks to the benefit of mentorship in coach education, in which experienced individuals guide less experienced counterparts through their ongoing developmental journey (Lascu et al., 2024). While not intended as a panacea for coach education and development, these three interwoven dimensions prioritise educative opportunities grounded in real-world coaching contexts – a perspective that has long been championed from by both academics and coaches (Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Culver et al., 2024; Cushion et al., 2003; Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Wood et al., 2023).

While such work remains conceptually promising for coach education, the practical benefits, limitations and challenges associated with its integration requires further inquiry. As such, the aim of this paper was to chart a course towards a situated approach to coach education in Australian football,

this time in collaboration *with* the coaching community – consisting of coaches, coach educators, coach education managers, and various stakeholders with vested interests in coach education.[2] More directly, this work asks and explores the following questions: (i) *What are the benefits of a situated approach to coach education in Australian football?* (ii) *What are the barriers of a situated approach, and how can they be addressed?* and (iii) *What strategies can be employed to effectively integrate a situated approach into coach education programs?* While acknowledging the existing research exploring the efficacy of 'in-situ' coach education, the specific and unique socio-cultural context of Australian football remains largely unexplored. This study, then, has the potential to inform policy and practice within the Australian football coach education landscape, contributing to the overall growth and development of the sport in Australia.

Method

Study design

This study used an interpretivist, qualitative research design. The interpretivist position encouraged participants to articulate the nuanced meanings of their experiences and practices within coach education, recognising that the comprehension of individual perspectives necessitates scrutiny and interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ling, 2016). Ethical considerations aligning with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research were followed (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018), with ethics approval being gained by the respective university Human Research Ethics Committee.

Participants

A purposive, criterion-based sampling approach was employed in which participants were selected based on their experiences within and with FA's coach education courses. Participants were required to have coached in Australian football for at least three years and/or demonstrate a vested interest in coach education since the release of the second edition of NFC in 2013 (within the past decade). A total of 28 participants contributed to this study, with the majority holding multiple roles as either a coach, coach educator, coach education manager and/or stakeholder at various points during their involvement in football. Despite the majority of participants' limited exposure to explicitly 'situated approaches' to coach education, their extensive first-hand experience in coaching and coach education closely reflects the core dimensions of a 'situated approach' we discuss: real-world contexts, Legitimate Peripheral Participation within a Community of Practice, and mentorship. Thereby providing a valuable foundation for reflecting on the potential benefits, barriers, and strategies of a situated

Table 1. Participant demographic data.

Demographic Features	Type	Count
Coaching Accreditation	Community Certificate	4
	C Licence	3
	B Licence	6
	A Licence	10
	Pro Diploma	5
Primary Role	Coach	14
	Coach Educator	5
	Coach Education Manager	4
	Stakeholder	5
Current Level of Involvement in Football	Community	6
	Semi-Professional	10
	Professional	12
Gender	Male	23
	Female	5

approach to coach education. For brevity, participants' primary role is depicted in Table 1. The sample's level of coaching experience at the time of the interviews (defined temporally in years) ranged from 3 to 35 years. Participants from this study were recruited through existing networks, social media, direct messaging, email and in-person contact. Following initial contact, participants were given more detailed information about the study goals, a list of sample conversation topics and the opportunity to ask questions about what to expect during an interview and how data would be analysed. All participants provided written consent, with the understanding that interviews would be conducted anonymously. Participant names were numerically coded from P1 to P28 throughout the analysis.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach based on three predetermined topics that aligned with the study aims: (i) the benefits of adopting a situated approach to coach education, (ii) the barriers and challenges associated with a situated approach, and (iii) potential strategies for integrating a situated approach to coach education. All interview questions were open-ended for conversational purposes, with the three pre-determined topics serving as discussion guides (Jamshed, 2014). The open-ended format increased the scope and depth of conversations when compared to closed-ended interviews (Jones et al., 2013), as well as providing greater flexibility in allowing participants to provide insights into the given topic(s). Table 2 shows examples of specific questions utilised during the semi-structured interviews.

The first author conducted a reflective process to evaluate the interview structure and question appropriateness (Clarke, 2013). This review resulted in only minor, semantic changes to the wording of some questions, with no further changes being made after the fifth interview. The first author conducted all interviews online, between January and April 2024. Interviews lasted 51–147 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and then analysed.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim using Trint (Trint Ltd) and then transferred to Microsoft Excel for further analysis. A pragmatic, six-staged thematic analysis approach was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author initially immersed themselves in the data, (re)reading transcripts to familiarise themselves with key terms, passages and themes related to the research questions. The second phase of the analysis involved generating lower and higher-order codes, aiding in identifying, grouping and mapping the data. Here, the second author joined the analysis process, providing an alternative perspective and challenging the codes representativeness and relationship to the original extracts. The authors used both inductive and deductive orientations to analyse the data and construct initial themes. For instance, for theme 1, a deductive analysis was conducted to organise identified themes in relation to Selimi and Woods (2024) three dimensions of a situated approach to coach education. These three dimensions provided a lens through which we interpreted

Table 2. Themes and subsequent questions explored in the semi-structured interviews.

Theme	Questions
Benefits of a Situated Approach	What are the benefits of a situated approach to coach education in Australian football? How can a situated approach influence coach learning and development? What are the benefits of learning in real-world contexts? What are the benefits of mentorship?
Barriers of a Situated Approach	What are the barriers to integrating a situated approach, and how can they be addressed?
Strategies for a Situated Approach	What strategies can be employed to effectively integrate a situated approach into coach education programmes?

and made sense of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022), providing an opportunity to further enrich our understandings. For the following two themes, an inductive analysis was undertaken, not only allowing for themes to surface naturally but also to encourage both authors to stay receptive to the narratives unfolding from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The next phases of our thematic analysis involved the re-searching, re-viewing, re-grouping and re-naming of codes into potential themes, ensuring that there was clear and identifiable patterns and meanings across the codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This led to phase six of the analysis, where vivid and compelling quotes from the interviews were selected to help illustrate the findings in the results and discussion section.

Research rigour

Having adopted a relativist position, we implemented several measures to produce a qualitative research design that was flexible, reliable and trustworthy in its data handling, interpretation and presentation (Creswell, 2014; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Purposive sampling of participants was employed to recruit and account for a diverse group of participants from the coach education sector, thereby opening up a wide range of perspectives. By including a broad range of participants, we sought to obtain richer insights on the coach education landscape, ensure our research's relevance beyond traditional formal structures, and enhance the credibility of our findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018). To this, the decision to conduct 28 interviews was predicated on methodological and practical considerations (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Specifically, we sought to make sure the sample size was large enough to allow for the unfolding of new and rich insights, but small enough to allow for a deep and comprehensive analysis (Sandelowski, 1995). Additionally, we stopped participant recruitment once the first author observed little to no new insights were being offered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Here, we established an inclusive participation criterion to attract not only large number of coaches, coach educators and coach education managers but also stakeholders with vested interest in coach education, such as club and coach education administrators. Moreover, to ensure participant responses were genuine reflections of their views, participants were consistently informed before, during and after the interview that their data would be confidential and anonymised.

To enhance our methodological rigour, the first author conducted three pilot interviews to refine the interview format and questions, ensuring their effectiveness in eliciting discussions directly related to the research questions. Further, recognising the potential influence of personal bias and subjectivity, especially given the first author's background not only as a participant in FA's Advanced Coaching Pathway but also as a published author on coach education in Australian football, reflexivity played a crucial role in establishing data trustworthiness (Finlay & Gough, 2008). Researcher triangulation between the first and second author involved consistent critique, challenge and refinement of codes and themes to ensure accurate interpretations between the authors and to reduce the impact of personal biases (Denzin, 2017; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results and discussion

The results and discussion are centred around the three predetermined topics: (i) the benefits of a situated approach to coach education; (ii) the barriers to integrating a situated approach; and (iii) strategies for integrating a situated approach into coach education. Excerpts that best captured the sentiments of the participants are featured throughout this section.

Theme 1: benefits of a situated approach to coach education

Drawing on the three dimensions espoused by Selimi and Woods (2024), the first theme highlights the benefits of a situated approach to coach education. Despite all three dimensions being

interwoven, in the interest of clarity, each are explored separately, enabling a more nuanced discussion of their relevance in the context of coach education.

Benefits of exposure to real-world contexts

Generally, participants felt that learning experiences based in real-world contexts, such as club environments[3], offered coaches better opportunities to 'learn the complexities of coaching' [P28], were more 'meaningful and relevant' [P6] and promoted 'real learning and development' [P24]. The 'key thing in learning is exposure; most people [in coach education] aren't exposed to the realities of coaching' [P7]. Although some participants saw value in the current approach, most participants argued that 'actual practice in real life plays the biggest role' in a coach's learning journey [P6].

Moreover, exposure to real-world contexts, according to some, provided a richer landscape for coaches to 'find' themselves and was seen as the 'only real way to truly learn their identity and coaching process' [P16]. Lave and Wenger (1991) speak to this sentiment, contending that learning one's own (coaching) identity is not simply a matter of 'acquiring' new knowledge, but that identity is grown in 'relation' to one's own practice in the real-world. Consequently, participants expressed a strong desire for coach education to be firmly grounded in real-world coaching contexts, expressing 'there is nothing better than experiencing coaching first-hand and working through mistakes. I think the opportunities for personal growth there are massive' [P15]. This preference stemmed from their frustrations with the current coach education model, criticising its abstract content and lack of context. The two excerpts below highlight the lack of practical relevance and applicability that participants mentioned:

> Coach education courses don't reflect the reality of coaching. You go on a course and you either don't have the players of the context that you're working with or you're using the coaches on the course. [P22]

> My experience has been that after coaches leave the course, all of a sudden, they're confronted with situations that just weren't covered on the course and all of a sudden, it's 'what do I do now?' [P25]

These sentiments resonate with broader criticisms of formal coach education (see Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion et al., 2010; Jones & Allison, 2014; Nelson et al., 2013; Paquette et al., 2019), which often fails to represent the complex and dynamic nature of coaching (Nash et al., 2017; Selimi et al., 2023; Stodter & Cushion, 2019). This finding is somewhat unsurprising though, given that FA's current coach education model is underpinned by what one participant termed a 'copy to create pedagogy' [P28], whereby coaches are given a framework to emulate with the expectation that they will eventually develop their own coaching approach as they progress through the courses. This copy to create approach, however, has considerable limitations – namely, it often fails to recognise how the broader environment shapes coaching (Vaughan et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2022). As such, participants overwhelmingly agreed that by re-situating educational experiences in real-world contexts, coaches would be better positioned to cultivate a deeper, more contextual understanding of the coaching profession, thereby better supporting their developmental needs (Wood et al., 2023).

Benefits of legitimate peripheral participation

Legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice extends on the idea that effective learning is not just a matter of being exposed to real-world contexts, but entails legitimately participating, such as assuming the role of an assistant coach. A notable benefit of such legitimate participation, as voiced by participants, was its potential to foster a 'feel' for the game, defined here as an embodied and intuitive understanding that transcends theoretical knowledge. This 'knowledge of' (Gibson, 1966, 1979) emerges through first-hand experiences of coaching, grown by getting one's hands dirty – by 'spending time on the grass'. This is in contrast to 'knowledge about' coaching, which is declarative and procedural information often transmitted by secondary sources (Williams & Davids, 1995; Woods & Davids, 2021); a distinction aptly noted by P16:

> I think when you've got time on the grass, you have the opportunity to design and deliver training sessions and work through factors that you're not made aware of during the courses. You actually need to 'feel' those problems, feel success, feel the frustrations when things don't go well and learn from those.

The emphasis on legitimate participation aligns with the place-based, relational underpinnings of enskilment (Ingold, 2021; Pierce & Telford, 2023; Woods et al., 2021). According to Ingold (2021), learning 'about' place is inseparable from being 'in' that place, or in other words, people (i.e. coaches) come to understand the nuances of their environments through immersion. The sustained first-hand experience of an environment, referred to as *dwelling*, is how people (i.e. coaches) become intimately familiar with the kinds of behaviours, habits and tasks that constitute an environment (also see Woods et al., 2021). Within the context of coach education, learning is not about the mere memorisation and reproduction of predefined content outside of its context, but that 'learning' is to resonate with the contexts people inhabit (O'Sullivan et al., 2023). In relation to this sentiment, participants noted that legitimate participation is likely to encourage coaches to discover their 'own style' [P21] and forge a sense of 'authenticity and integrity' [P2] in their practice (Wenger, 2002). While communities of practice can help nurture a coach's own identity, they can inadvertently stifle individuality by reinforcing dominant ideologies and practices (Wenger, 2002). Thus, the role and importance of mentorship, specifically one underpinned by the notion of 'leading out' (Lascu et al., 2024), is not only essential in helping minimise these risks but fundamental in a situated approach (Selimi & Woods, 2024). This benefit is in direct contrast to the current model of coach education in Australian football (see Selimi et al., 2023; Selimi & Woods, 2024), which as P16 suggests, discourages exploration in favour of promoting a 'right way' to coach (also see Chapman et al., 2020):

> I don't think there is enough time on the course to develop a strong understanding [of yourself] and all the concepts presented. You get an introduction, and it might flick a switch, but you really need to have the opportunity to put those things into practice so it can become authentic. And when it's authentic, players understand you more and they don't feel like you're trying to fabricate something that isn't really you.

The emphasis on 'authentic' in the above underscores a paradigm shift relating to how participants perceive the value of coach education. Rather than merely seeking 'knowledge about' coaching, participants appear to claim for a deeper, more embodied 'knowledge of' coaching, enabling them to navigate the complexities of their specific context in a manner that aligns with their values and beliefs. Yet despite this, the current coach education model, with its emphasis on standardisation, 'makes it almost impossible for coach educators to meet the specific needs of coaches' [P12]. As a consequence, 'coaches [on courses] never really feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts, asking questions or being creative. They literally just sit there, shut up and keep quiet, because that's the easiest thing to do rather than be themselves' [P23].

This speaks to another notable benefit of legitimate participation, as expressed by participants, in that it has the potential to cultivate a more collaborative, supportive and psychologically safe learning environment[4] (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Turner & Harder, 2018; Vella et al., 2024; Wenger, 2002). This was particularly evident in discussions around preferred learning settings, where participants found the most valuable aspects to their development were largely informal interactions and exchanges that occurred outside of formal education. By promoting opportunities for coaches to legitimately participate in real-world coaching contexts, coach education programmes may be able to draw on the collective experience of the coaching community, facilitating a more collaborative, safer and authentic learning environment. Although providing opportunities for legitimate participation may yield significant learning and social benefits for coaches, it does not imply that coaches should be left to simply 'find their way' within a community, nor does it constitute a sufficient or effective educative experience in and of itself (Woods & Davids, 2021). Thus, to ensure coaches can effectively develop their knowledge *of* coaching, as Selimi and Woods (2024) contend, the integration of mentorship is an essential tenet toward the effectiveness of a situated approach.

Benefits of mentorship

This leads to the third dimension of the situated approach espoused by Selimi and Woods (2024): the benefit of mentorship. When asked how mentorship could benefit the educative experience, the following participants mentioned:

> Mentorship has played an important and large role in my development as a coach. I'd almost go as far as to say that it's been pretty integral to my pathway and career to date. [P16]

> I am very proud of my apprenticeship, being mentored by some of the best names in football and working with them as their assistant. I learnt a lot about my ability, and I guess my coaching philosophy was influenced through those apprenticeships. [P7]

Having personalised feedback within a particular coaching context was often regarded as a key benefit of mentorship. Participants found that working alongside, collaborating with and getting feedback from mentors provided insights to their practice that could be hard to gain in decontextualised course settings that often present abstract content (Lascu et al., 2024). For example, when coaches complete a course, they leave and 'all of a sudden, they're confronted with situations that weren't covered on the course, or are left wondering 'what do I do now?' Mentoring could fill those gaps' [P25]. Importantly, the role of a mentor within a situated approach would be one of collaboration and guidance *without* specification (Ingold, 2013). Meaning, mentorship could be understood as a way of growing coaches' knowledge *of* coaching, helping mentees discover and attend to things for themselves in a safe but uncertain way (Morris et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2023). One way in which mentors may facilitate this development is through their ability to provide situated and contextual feedback:

> Ultimately, as much as you try, coach education can't replicate it [mentoring in someone's own context]. So, I think having exposure to the realities of someone's context, the challenges they face, the players that they deal with, the constraints that they're under, you'll gain a true understanding of what they have to deal with. That's where you start to see the intricacies of coaching and what it requires. And that can be something really difficult to explain and work through in a classroom. That's where the real value of mentorship lies. [P12]

Indeed, it has been proposed that the identification of a coaches skills and knowledge can be better understood within the specific environment a coach operates in (Wood et al., 2023). This suggests that the *education* of coaches' skills and knowledge may also need to occur in representative settings (Selimi & Woods, 2024). Possessing a nuanced appreciation of one's unique circumstance could help cultivate a positive, safer and supportive environment for coach development (Wood et al., 2023). Many participants, for example, emphasised that mentorships often create a space where coaches feel comfortable expressing themselves, leading them to take risks, make mistakes and ask questions without fear of judgment or ridicule; an aspect that the current model of coach education is unable to provide:

> Unfortunately, there's a lot of ego on these football courses, and you can see that play out throughout. You're being judged for what you've done as a player or a coach prior to being in that environment, as opposed to what you can actually do on the course. [P23]

The sense of safety associated with mentorship is likely to promote an environment supportive of experimentation and innovation in coaching practice, leading coaches to try things while supported by experienced others (Lascu et al., 2024). Not only would this safe experimentation promote difference in practice, but it could cultivate a more inclusive and welcoming coaching community bound by differentiation:

> I think [mentorship] would go some way towards breaking down some of the cultural barriers I've spoken about before, where the coaching fraternity often is closed rather than looking to support one another. [P6]

> Mentorships open up coaching to all types of people. Not only 'football' people, especially for people who haven't seen themselves as coaches. [P21]

Of particular note were participants who identified with underrepresented groups (e.g. those based on gender or cultural and linguistic diversity) that often perceived the current coach education environment as intimidating and exclusive. Mentorship could provide a safer space for learning, allowing coaches to comfortably share ideas, ask questions and experiment with new concepts (Martins et al., 2024). This benefit is in direct contrast to the current educative system's tendency to move toward standardisation and indoctrination, which has been accused of alienating those who do not conform to a predetermined identity (Bradbury et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2018). As P23 noted:

> Courses do a really good job at weeding coaches out, rather than developing them and improving their confidence to perhaps want to progress or stay in coaching.

While these findings echo concerns raised in the literature (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008; Lewis et al., 2018), they also underscore the potential of a situated approach to mitigate these concerns. This is primarily due to its emphasis on fostering social interaction and the sharing of ideas (Lave & Wenger, 1991), while helping coaches develop a sense of belonging and connection, which can be crucial for their ongoing learning and development (Wenger, 2002).

Theme 2: barriers of a situated approach to coach education

While the perceived benefits of a situated approach to coach education in Australian football were considered, there were also barriers challenging its successful integration. As will be explored in this section, these barriers anchored around three sub-themes: (i) systemic and institutional barriers; (ii) cultural resistance to change; and (iii) the governance of a situated approach.

Systemic and institutional barriers

Systemic and institutional barriers were considered by participants to be significant challenges to the integration of a situated approach to coach education. Two key areas of concern emerged during the interviews: (i) a perceived lack of value placed on coach education and development by FA, and (ii) ineffective internal structures and processes. The perceived lack of value placed on coach education, according to participants, was reflected in the limited funding, resources, and unproductive decision making related with coach education design and delivery:

> I think FA needs to take coach education seriously and genuinely listen to coaches. I don't know if it's because they [FA] don't have money or they don't really value coaching, but they just don't care enough about investing in coach education.

> Working within FA's coach education sector, you try and find different ways to reinforce the importance and value of coach education, but for whatever reason, there isn't a strong enough voice with enough sway to be able to say, it's not alright and it's not where it should be. [P12]

The current resourcing allocated towards coach education by FA was seen as being inadequate, influencing the quality of coach education. For example, P1 explained that the lack of resources available 'forced' coach educators and coach education managers to design and deliver programmes that were 'secondary, sometimes tertiary priority for them'. The lack of funding also influenced FA's structure and internal operations, with one participant describing FA as 'one of the most inefficient organisations I ever had the pleasure of working with' [P18]. This perceived inefficiency was largely attributed to the disconnect between FA and its member state federations, which was seen by participants as contributing to inconsistencies in coach education, deterring the establishment of a more unified approach:

> A large part of the problem with coach education in Australia is that the state federations are never on board with FA, and they don't have to be. The state federations always control the narrative in the end. FA doesn't have the ability to have a clearly defined national plan around coach education. [P7]

This disconnect has also been acknowledged by FA (Football Australia, 2020), potentially stifling the development of new coach education initiatives but also reflective of the complex interplay between stakeholder agendas (Chapman et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2018). As voiced by P5:

> Coach education right now in Australia is the Wild West, because anybody can do it, and everybody [member federations] does it their own way and that's why we're not progressing.

When coupled, these issues not only hinder the potential integration of a situated approach but can also contribute to an organisational or even sport-wide culture that becomes path dependent and resistant to change (see Rothwell et al., 2020). These findings resonate with research on organisational change in sport, stressing the key roles of leadership, culture and structure that enable innovation and novel practices (Sahin, 2022; Skinner et al., 2018). Transitioning to a situated approach in Australian football may require FA to rethink its investment in coach education, positioning the development of coaches as an important pillar of sport-wide development. However, addressing these issues alone may not be sufficient, as will be explored next, significant cultural barriers may need to be concurrently surmounted.

Cultural resistance

A cultural resistance to change was noted by participants as a barrier to the integration of a situated approach to coach education. This resistance seemed to manifest in various forms, ranging from an unwillingness to embrace new ideas and methodologies, to a staunch defence of current coach education practices. This resistance is further reinforced by a perception within FA that previous iterations of coach education were considered 'world-leading' at their time of instantiation [P16]. Perhaps the purported resistance to change could be attributed to vested interests within the football community, where established practices and associated positions may be threatened by the paradigm shift required to integrate a situated approach to coach education (see O'Sullivan et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2023). Participants expressed concerns about a prevailing mindset among certain sections of the coach education sector that prioritises the maintenance of the status quo:

> Football [in this country] suffers from its success in terms of numbers. It's a case where what we're doing must be okay [because of participation numbers] rather than saying, no, we can do it better. It seems to me that the culture around coach education is very much, no, we just do what we do and it's all about X's and O's. [P25]

Several participants spoke to this sentiment when discussing why previous attempts to integrate more *in-situ* approaches failed to generate change. For example, P25 mentioned that 'some people [within coach education] drive a culture that isn't appreciative of change', while P7 stated that the current educative system is 'controlled and managed to keep people employable'. While rather damning, such sentiments do lead us to ask whether individuals who benefit from the existing coach education system are open to a situated approach, as it could disrupt established hierarchical structures (Piggott, 2012; Zehntner & McMahon, 2019). However, some participants did not feel as though this path dependency was insurmountable, noting the need for leadership that moves toward a clear vision for coach education reform. In sum, it seems that a successful transition to a situated approach requires a commitment from leaders within the football community to actively support doing things differently.

The competitive ethos ingrained within the Australian football community was cited as another barrier to the integration of a situated approach, potentially impacting collaboration and constraining the recruitment of suitable mentors. This reluctance to collaborate, according to participants, would also influence the recruitment of suitable mentors. Here, participants described a widespread 'closed-off' mentality, in which coaches are reluctant to share their approaches and experiences. For instance, P11 noted that coaches in Australia can be 'very secretive, everyone wants to keep their ideas to themselves', while P28 noted that coaches are 'more reluctant to share with people who could someday be in a position to take their job'. Here, it was thought that the 'gatekeeping' of

information throughout the coaching community was fuelled by coaches' egos and anxieties about being 'found out' [P5] or judged by their peers. There seems to be an unwillingness for coaches to share, leading many to 'run a closed shop' and 'not let people in' [P7]. This led to a belief that Australian coaches needed to set aside their 'self-doubt and ego' [P5] and 'buy into' [P25] ideas like mentorship. It seems that in order to successfully integrate a situated approach into coach education in Australian football, Australian 'coaches must be prepared to *mentor* as well as be *mentored*' [P4].

The competitive ethos in a community can generate a form of 'anti-learning culture', in which sharing knowledge and collaboration are disincentivised by interpersonal competition and a perceived lack of career opportunities, leading to forms of 'gatekeeping' (see Piggott, 2012; Wenger, 2002; Zehntner & McMahon, 2019). This, according to some participants, contributes to a coaching culture that is 'all about the win' [P24] – from grassroots to high-performance environments. This competitive ethos among coaches is not limited to Australian football (Norris et al., 2017), and while it can help to drive improvement, it can also contribute to the reproduction of negative consequences, such as anxiety, burnout and reduced willingness to collaborate (Sakib, 2021; Teques et al., 2019; Upenieks et al., 2023).

Governance of a situated approach

Beyond systemic and cultural barriers, the governance of a situated approach presented complexities, particularly in (i) governing the mentorship experience, (ii) mentor recruitment, and (iii) learning assessment. While mentorship was portrayed as beneficial, participants acknowledged the difficulties in establishing and maintaining effective mentor-mentee relationships, noting the potential for power imbalances, personality mismatches or a lack of clarity on roles as barriers (see Koh et al., 2014; Leeder et al., 2021; Leeder & Cushion, 2020). Participants emphasised the importance of fostering mentor-mentee relationships that were based on collaboration and reciprocation, where both parties learn and grow together:

> We need to make sure that coaches [mentees] have mentors who are very understanding and patient about their journey. I've seen it too many times, where a lot of information gets pushed, a lot of agendas being pushed by mentors because it makes sense in their own context rather than the context of the mentee. [P1]

The idea of reciprocal benefits in mentorship aligns with calls for more balanced mentor-mentee relationships (Langdon & Ward, 2015; Lascu et al., 2024; Leeder et al., 2022). For a truly rewarding experience, the mentor-mentee relationship ought to be founded on 'mutual respect' [P21], and a shared willingness to share and learn from one another (Leeder et al., 2022). Should such relationships lack a collaborative and supportive basis, they can quickly lead to power imbalances, as P21 explains:

> A mentor for me is a facilitator. As soon as there is a power dynamic of someone being the boss and someone being the mentee, then you lose that power of mutual respect.

These challenges are particularly pronounced for underrepresented groups: 'If we go down the path of a mentorship model, if people from minority groups don't feel comfortable with who they are paired up with, they'll just back away' [P27]. These findings signal the necessity for FA to clearly promote the mentor's role as a 'co-learner' (see Langdon, 2014; Lascu et al., 2024), rather than an authority who determines what should and should not be learned (Leeder et al., 2022).

Participants also noted that not all experienced coaches make good mentors, and that a mentor programme should consider an individual's 'interpersonal skills' [P21]. This contradicts the commonly held view within the football 'community' that a coach with 'experience' is naturally suitable for a mentoring role (Leeder et al., 2019). To this, mentors need not be coaches further along the development pathway but could be those who effectively 'guide by the side' to support coaches through their experiences of coaching (Lascu et al., 2024; Leeder et al., 2022).

Finally, participants questioned how an assessment framework could be used to help govern a situated approach, not only for measuring the impact of such experiences but also for ensuring

alignment with the accreditation requirements imposed on FA by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). 'We are sort of hamstrung, in that the AFC say that you have to do three assessments within the course, you have to have an exam, you have to have an oral interview and all these other things' [P24]. Because of these 'restrictions around coach education' [P24], there is a need to strike a balance between satisfying accreditation requirements to ensure the full recognition of a coaches' credentials can be obtained and ensuring that assessment methods are both rigorous and relevant.

Theme 3: strategies for integrating a situated approach to coach education

Informed by the benefits and barriers, this theme explores practical strategies for integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football. Two strategies were specifically noted throughout this section of the interview: (i) club environments acting as the locus to coach education, and (ii) the development of a mentorship programme. Critically, both strategies weave together the three interwoven dimensions of the situated approach to coach education proposed by Selimi and Woods (2024) and as such, will be discussed generally.

Club environments as the primary locus of coach education

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the most effective and sustainable way to integrate a situated approach was to make club environments the primary locus of coach education. One purported advantage of this approach is that club environments may act as the domain for all three dimensions espoused by Selimi and Woods (2024). This, however, would require FA to reposition its role within education, focusing on empowering, upskilling, and supporting clubs to take ownership of their own coach development programmes, rather than attempting to universalise its agenda. Such repositioning also extends to the coach educators, who could be employed, not to be course presenters as such, but to be 'coach developers in terms of mentoring' [P6]. Such an approach has recently gained traction at the community level through the implementation of the Club Coach Coordinator (CCC) programme. Delivered by a handful of member federations across the country, the CCC programme is based on supporting the development of coaches within their respective club environments, empowering clubs to become self-sufficient learning hubs (Football Australia, 2018).

The concept of club-based education aligns with the notion of enskilment in its advocacy of skills and knowledge being shaped by the socio-cultural contexts in which they are practised (Ingold, 2017). Otherwise stated, it is the practice of a community that creates the basis for what *can* and *is* learned – its 'curriculum' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Thus, by establishing club environments as the primary locus of coach education, coaches could be afforded richer opportunities to grow a deeper knowledge of their community's most valued practices, behaviours and skills, while concurrently helping cultivate a greater sense of belonging across the coaching ecosystem (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2002). By tapping into a club's resources and expertise, coach education can become more accessible, cost-efficient, and less dependent on governing bodies and their associated costs, potentially leading to more bespoke educational content, knowledge and skill development (see Myhre & Moen, 2017; Selimi et al., 2023; Selimi & Woods, 2024).

Following these sentiments, participants discussed the crucial role of the Technical Director (TD) in integrating a situated approach. Participants envisioned the TD's role as that of a mentor and coach developer, providing guidance and feedback. As P16 stated: 'the role of a technical director should be to help the coaches grow and develop'. Such a role repositioning was noteworthy, as TDs hold a unique position in the coach development ecosystem. Most importantly, they are situated within the socio-cultural context in which 'their' coaches' practice, which means they have a profound knowledge of (not just about) the attitudes, opinions, beliefs and values that underpin a club's coaching practices. As a result, they are uniquely positioned to provide coaches with feedback that is both contextually relevant and consistent, a key feature of effective mentorship (Jones & Allison, 2014; McCullick et al., 2005).

Despite this advantageous position, Australian football remains in 'a stage where the role of the TD generally isn't geared towards supporting coaches in their own environment,' [P12]. TDs 'wear so many hats, they handle everything from scheduling, budgeting and to player recruitment. It leaves little time to support their coaches' [P5]. Some participants expressed concern that even if the administrative burden was reduced, some TDs may lack the necessary skills to mentor and develop other coaches: 'I've seen some TDs who are great coaches themselves, but they don't know how to mentor or develop other coaches. They need more training and support in those areas' [P13]. To this, there was a view that many clubs appoint TDs without a clear understanding of their role, leading to a lack of strategic consideration. As P25 noted:

> I suspect that many clubs just put a name in that box of technical director, so they can go, 'we've ticked that, we've got one', without looking at what their function is. That's not to say there aren't some good technical directors out there. I believe there are. It's simply not viewed as part of a strong structure.

To help realise the potential of TDs as coach educators, FA would need to invest in their professional development. This might include programmes tailored to TDs so as to facilitate the pedagogical and mentoring development necessary for them to enact a situated approach to coach education. Additionally, FA might help revitalise the TD role by restoring a clear, more robust definition of what this role entails, not only articulating TDs' roles and responsibilities within the context of club environments, but also in terms of a wider coach education landscape. By raising awareness of the significance of the TD position, clubs may be prompted to perceive the role with greater importance, better recognising its value in coach education and development. This was supported by P8, who stated that: 'the best-run clubs across the country have great technical directors who truly understand what their role is. And it's not just about developing players, it's also about developing coaches'.

Integration of a mentorship programme

Participants strongly favoured club-based mentor – and apprenticeships, viewing them not only as a richer and more effective educative experience when compared to the current model, but as their preferred learning modality, aligning with emerging literature advocating for situated approaches to coach education (Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Kinchin & Kirk, 2003; Mesquita et al., 2014). To facilitate such a mentorship programme, participants suggested establishing a nationally accessible registry of certified mentors, providing detailed profiles of mentors' characteristics, availability, experience, qualifications and expertise, enabling the effective matching of mentors and mentees. To incentivise participation and mitigate the perceived financial and resource constraints associated with its implementation, participants suggested various mechanisms that ranged from formal recognition within the (re)accreditation processes, the allocation of continued professional development (CPD) points, and contributions to club rating systems where direct financial compensation from FA was not feasible for mentors.

As noted in the second theme, a significant barrier to such a mentorship programme lies in mentor availability, which is challenged by various factors, including temporal constraints, geographical dispersion, and the mentor certification process. To address these challenges, participants suggested integrating apprenticeships into coach education, allowing mentors to host mentees, thus involving all three dimensions of the situated approach proposed by Selimi and Woods (2024), albeit not directly within the coach's (i.e. mentees) own club environment.

Participants emphasised the need to 'formalise' [P17] mentorship, implying some level of quality control. For example, P24 stated that: 'mentors should be accredited, so that there is accountability and responsibility from both parties', reflecting the belief that mentorship itself is a skill, and that mentors themselves must go through a process of training and certification in order to effectively guide others. Although strongly advocated for, the process of becoming a certified mentor is indeed another challenge that would need careful consideration – one that falls outside the scope of this paper. While a growing body of research explores mentor development approaches

and their impact on coach education (see Chambers, 2018; Lascu et al., 2024; Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021; Sawiuk et al., 2024), further investigation within an Australian football context is warranted. Despite the challenges, a formalised mentorship programme offers FA with a plausible pathway to integrate mentorship experiences into the coach accreditation process, while offering a mechanism to verify whether mentors possess the appropriate character, skills, and knowledge to effectively support mentees. Further, a formalised mentorship programme could facilitate effective pairings of mentor and mentee, while setting clear expectations of the roles and responsibilities for both parties.

While the formalisation of a mentorship programme and subsequent certification offers both benefits and challenges, some participants raised concerns that formalising mentorship could lead to the creation of a bureaucratic system that discourages participation and limits opportunities:

> I guess my experience with FA is that incorporating this [mentorship program] may lead to a certification process that drives a monopoly over opportunities. [P8]

Striking an appropriate balance between mentorship quality and inclusivity would be paramount to the success of a formalised mentorship programme – whatever it may 'look' like. In sum, our results highlight two strategies that could be of use when considering ways of integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football: (i) situating club environments as the primary locus of coach education, and (ii) the development of a mentorship programme. Exploring these strategies further offers an enticing platform for future research.

Limitations and future research

Although offering novel insights, this study is not without limitations that warrant discussion. Namely, despite a broad and diverse range of participants contributing to almost 60 hours of interview data, these findings may only offer a window into the perspectives of the larger Australian football coaching and coach education community (Brinkmann, 2018), while representing viewpoints from a specific point in time (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In order to account for such evolving perspectives, future research may benefit from including study designs that can gather perspectives from a wider audience, such as online surveys and questionnaires, or conducting multiple follow up interviews. Further, alternative research designs like case studies, observations, ethnographies, interventions, or longitudinal studies could explore the practical implications of a situated approach to coach education. While grounded in the Australian football context, the theoretical tenets of the situated approach to coach education may appear applicable across different sporting codes, industries and contexts. However, given the implications associated with such an approach, we advise researchers, coaches, coach educators, coach education managers and sporting organisations who may be interested in exploring a situated approach to do so with a comprehensive understanding of the specific benefits, barriers and opportunities unique to their context. Lastly, the situated approach presented in this paper should not be viewed as 'the' way, but rather an 'alternative' way for addressing the learning and developmental needs of Australian football coaches. Given the inherent complexities of coach education (Dempsey et al., 2021), and the profound implications a situated approach has on our understandings of knowledge, skill, learning and education, the findings of this paper should not be considered as an end point to this line of inquiry, but as rather adding to the ongoing conversation.

Conclusion

This study explored the benefits and barriers of integrating a situated approach to coach education, as purported by Australian football coaches, coach educators, coach education managers and football administrators. Participants highlighted the critical need for reform in the current coach education landscape, expressing a strong preference for a situated approach that values exposure, legitimate participation and mentorship. The study also revealed a number of systemic, institutional

and cultural barriers that could impede the integration of a situated approach. These included FA's perceived lack of value for coach education, inefficient and disconnected internal organisational structures, and a cultural resistance to change within the coaching community. Further, the governance of a situated approach is complicated in areas such as establishing effective mentor-mentee dynamics, recruiting and developing appropriate mentors, and developing a comprehensive assessment framework that balances governance and accreditation requirements. Despite these challenges, participants were generally optimistic about the potential for integrating a situated approach to coach education into Australian football. Drawing from this optimism, a path toward what such an approach to coach education could look like was charted through two primary strategies: (i) establishing club environments as the primary locus of coach education, and (ii) integrating a mentorship programme as a core pillar of coach education. By adopting these strategies, Australian football may be poised to begin moving towards a more collaborative, contextualised and situated approach to coach education.

Notes

1. In conjunction with nine member federations, Football Australia (the national governing body) are largely responsible in establishing the national framework for coach education. While generally guided by Football Australia, there is a reported mis-alignment in the national technical strategy across member federations (Football Australia, 2020).
2. For the purpose of this paper, coach educators were defined as those who were primarily responsible for delivering and facilitating coach education courses, whereas coach education managers were those who have a broader role that includes both delivery and programme design.
3. Here, club environment refers to the coaching setting within footballing clubs, schools, or academies where coaches, regardless of their employment status (volunteer, casual, part-time, or full-time), principally and consistently practice coaching.
4. Based on participant sentiments, we adopted the following definition of psychological safety from Turner and Harder (2018): 'a feeling or climate whereby the learner can feel valued and comfortable yet still speak up and take risks without fear of retribution, embarrassment, judgment or consequences either to themselves or others, thereby promoting learning and innovation' (p. 49).

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