

Article

Bordering, Connecting, and Dispelling within Sports Coaching: Erasing the Practitioner–Scholar Divide

Robyn L. Jones ^{1,2}, Charles L. T. Corsby ^{1,*}  and Gethin L. Thomas ¹

¹ Cardiff School of Sport and Health Sciences, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff CF23 6XD, UK; rljones@cardiffmet.ac.uk (R.L.J.)

² Department of Sport, Food and Natural Sciences, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Høgskulen på Vestlandet, Postbox 7030, 5020 Bergen, Norway

* Correspondence: ccorsby@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Abstract: The current picture of sports coaching suggests one where practitioners and scholars operate not so much at a particular interface, but rather on parallel lines of development; in essence, of talking *past* as opposed *to* each other. Through a critical re-reading of the practitioner–scholar divide, this paper takes issue with the existence of the separate identities featured, in addition to the argument that we merely need a better, rather straightforward, connection between theory and practice to ‘fix the problem’. Alternatively, the case made highlights how the problematic ‘othering’ nature of a theory–practice division has severely hampered the development of the field. In terms of structure, we initially challenge existing ‘anti-intellectual’ claims within coaching, essentially by advocating for better appreciating the everyday, socio-pedagogic nature of the activity. In this respect, the relegation of experience, of the inherent ‘code of coaching’ (so dear to coaches themselves), is protected against. Secondly, we promote the idea of encouraging coaches, coaching scholars, and coach educators to consider the indivisibility of theory and practice through the use of such notions as sensitizing concepts, internalisation, and authenticity to improve the ‘doing’ of the job. Of particular importance here is the development and utilisation of a critical consciousness of coaching; not only of thoroughly understanding the activity, but also in actively fashioning it through engagement with new ideas. This latter notion gives required credence, however loosely, to some guiding frame of reference; otherwise we become enmeshed in, and blinded by, the immediate. In dismantling the wall that has divided practitioners and scholars by not giving authority or indeed acceptance to such fixed positions, we alternatively advocate for the creation of a more authentic coaching life through living the theory that actively sustains it.

Keywords: sports coaching; practice to theory; sensitizing concepts; dialectical; authenticity



Citation: Jones, R.L.; Corsby, C.L.T.; Thomas, G.L. Bordering, Connecting, and Dispelling within Sports Coaching: Erasing the Practitioner–Scholar Divide. *Societies* **2023**, *13*, 201. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13090201>

Academic Editor: José Carmelo Adsuar

Received: 21 June 2023

Revised: 14 August 2023

Accepted: 25 August 2023

Published: 27 August 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the century, the problematic disconnect between theory (broadly taken as a set of concepts to indicate and/or explain a phenomenon) and practice (the acting of that phenomenon) has been increasingly highlighted and discussed in a number of fields, for example, in education (e.g., [1,2]), tourism (e.g., [3]), and nursing (e.g., [4,5]), to name but a few. The subject and matter of sports coaching has not been immune from such deliberation (e.g., [6,7]), with the diagrammatic models and linear thinking, which previously dominated the literature, cited as the principal cause of the disconnect—see, for example, [8]. This is because representation has consequences [9]. Hence, the depiction of an inherent socio-pedagogically driven cultural activity, as a value-neutral atomised one (no matter the stated intention), has inevitable political and perceptual implications [10]. In this case, the belief that theory and practice simply do not align, leading to a constructed divide between those who study and write about the doing of coaching and those who actually do it. It has also led to, amongst other things, a certain conceptual disagreement, and subsequent rigid encampment, as to what the practice of sports coaching is really about.

Yet, such an argument as related to the integration of theory and practice is not a new one. Indeed, notwithstanding critiques of his concept of the individual as an unregulated, decontextualised learner, it can even be traced back to Emmanuel Kant's 'Copernican Revolution', which represented an attempt at synthesizing early modern rationalism and empiricism. As Kant [11] said in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Thoughts without contents are empty, perceptions without conceptions are blind. . . . Understanding can perceive nothing, the senses can think nothing. Knowledge arises only from their united action" (p. 193). That coaching, as an academic area, has seemingly ignored such a fundamental position, and speaks to a critical poverty that needs addressing. Such a poverty relates to the general lack of criticality evident in coaching to question or agree upon the essence of the activity, in addition to the rather entrenched disconnect between theory and practice.

The purpose of this paper is relatedly three-fold. Firstly, as stated, it is to briefly outline the current situation, including a critique of even well-intentioned attempts at integrating the apparent opposites in question. Here, the use of terms such as 'pracademic' or 'practical theorist' to describe coaches, and text titles, including straplines, such as 'theory to practice' or vice versa are criticised for augmenting fragmented thinking through discursive representation. The second purpose is to further position the heavy lifting (that is, the difficult arduous task(s)) of coaching as a local order phenomenon; to better uncover, articulate and engage with the 'constitutive rules' of its practice [12]. Although the case has been made before, the significance here lies in providing a further counterargument to the growing anti-intellectualising evident within the field as witnessed in coaches' criticisms of scholarly work, social trends, and/or the 'academic' content of coach education provision (e.g., [13,14]). Such include an uncritical propensity to valorise practitioner knowledge and its associated sources of informal learning within a generally conservative learning culture [13]. It is a tendency both created by whilst further creating the assumed divide between theory and practice.

Thirdly, we offer an alternative approach to the issue in terms of erasing the firm perceived differences through acknowledging and highlighting the interdependent relationship between theory and practice. The particular suggested means to achieve such a synthesis include Blumer's 'sensitising concepts' [15], Vygotsky's dialectical 'river' and related goal of internalisation, and notions derived from existentialist authenticity, where individuals are encouraged to 'live their words'. Blumer's initial discussed notion gives required credence, however loosely, to some conceptual sense-making frame of reference to protect against becoming enmeshed in, and blinded by, the immediate. This is subsequently developed into a case not only for an 'agency of the concept' [16], but also, and perhaps more so, for an 'agency over the concept' [17]. In addition, we offer consideration of Vygotsky's writing [18] to overcome the dualism of theoretical knowledge (which he termed the scientific) and everyday practice. In line with the broader case made, the purpose here is to merge opposing views into a continuous whole in order to better conceptualise and subsequently use new knowledge. Finally, recourse is made to notions of existentialist authenticity, including determining one's own 'potentiality-for-Being' [19]. Such a development relates to an awakening from an unreflective existence to a better developed sense of self, and where notions of 'living one's words' is promoted. Although such approaches differ in several aspects, particularly in terms of their intention for application, they nevertheless can be seen to follow a similar argumentation related to fundamental scepticism about dualist positions. What further binds them closer together in relation to the case made in this paper is an engagement with radical reflexivity to improve the 'doing' of coaching. Such a reflexivity encompasses the development of a critical consciousness of coaching through a constructive dismantling of its taken-for-granted features. Consequently, in taking issue with the implied conservatism of 'settled positions', the unsettling associated with radical reflexivity [20] allows for not only a deeply empathetic understanding of coaching in terms of its quiddity (defined as 'just what-ness' or essence) [21], but also of consciously sculpting it through engagement with new theoretically developed ideas. Such a reflexivity, hence, is not encouraged as a self-indulgent or vanity project, but as the discernible careful

analysis and ensuing “control of practice” [22]. In subsequently dismantling the wall that has divided practitioners and scholars, we thus advocate for the creation of a more faithful and genuine coaching life through living the theory that actively sustains it.

The value of the paper, echoing the earlier work of Jones and colleagues [23], perhaps is less to do with giving ‘new stuff’ as much as ‘ordering the stuff’ we already know [24]. This is another reason why we need to think seriously about unifying practice and theory, in the hope that making the implicit explicit can help make sense of what we know, so we can make better use of it. In the words of Elliot Eisner [25], theory can “make coherent what otherwise appear as disparate individual events” (p. viii), whilst being “the means through which we learn lessons that can apply to situations we have yet to encounter”. In this respect, we agree with Madison’s [26] sentiment related to the indivisibility of concept and practice that although “I would surely lose myself without performance, I cannot live well without theory” (p. 109).

2. The Current Situation and the Challenge Ahead

While critical sport coaching research has been celebrated by those who promote the resulting rich insights (e.g., [27]), related academic study still lacks authoritative legitimacy within the general field. In turn, discussions on how research findings are shared within public settings, and how academic work functions to support the doing of coaching, remain limited. The reasons for this principally relate to the separate thinking and conceptualisation of coaching from within the field and across other disciplines. The purpose of this section, then, is to situate the current relations between coaching research, knowledge, and practice through exploring how research has often been devalued, or ‘flattened’, leaving claimed (practical) expertise as uncritically accepted.

Regarding the separate thinking mentioned above, this can be traced to the traditional and somewhat ongoing belief that the practice of coaching equates to a form of functional sport science. Here, a coach is considered an unproblematic method applier, where all that is required of one is to utilise results from ‘scientifically based’ sports research to succeed at coaching. The primacy given to ‘knowledge for (passive) coaches’ has given credibility to the idea of theory as deriving from higher mental (academic) functioning and thus distinct from applied, practical work. Although the past two decades have witnessed attempts at positioning coaches as much more than docile recipients, including insight into the essence of coaching itself [12], the problematic relationship between the theory and of coaching has remained.

A particular difficulty faced by this (relatively recent) social turn in coaching, although grounded in everyday practice, is, somewhat ironically, its lack of standing and acceptance. It appears that following a diet of bio-scientific and ‘how to’ advice has made the more problematic, nuanced engagement required by critical relational work difficult to swallow [27]. Hence, while we would expect the positions and public knowledge claims made by ‘experts’ to be respected (i.e., a leading biologist to speak about biology), by contrast, coaching research (i.e., research in and on coaching) lacks the required cultural authority within the general field. This has, in turn, left ‘informed’ thought about coaching as something of a free for all—a point often reiterated through social media outlets, punditry, and, worse still, by National Governing Bodies. The result, of course, is the continuing disconnection between researched theoretical insight and the practice of coaching.

Somewhat in response, recent attempts to claim the legitimacy of knowledge about coaching has included the use of terms such as ‘pracademic’ and ‘practical theorist’ as a way of emphasising the connection between research and practice. According to Eacott [28], pracademic work involves ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in addition to something more; that being a conscious shift towards a space where *individuals* combine both. As a result, the pracademic is positioned as credible in the academy and the occupation. Such a shift has gained traction in a range of fields (e.g., education [29,30], management [31], and sports coaching [32]). It is an argument often cited as part of the educational transitioning of

individuals, usually through work-related placements to better connect research and theory with practice and experience.

Despite the prevalence and general rectitude of the sentiment, Eacott [28] nevertheless outlined several fundamental issues with the premise of the pracademic. The first, and perhaps most poignant critique, refers to the artificial dualism created between research (i.e., theory informed) and practice (i.e., those working in particular locations), which can somehow be overcome by combining the two (i.e., pracademic). Such a divide, it is claimed, not only privileges particular classes of knowledge (e.g., theory over practice, or vice versa), but assumes that a field's knowledge is separate or different for its constituent members (e.g., those doing it, and those writing about the doing). In further problematising the issue, Eacott [28] questioned the apparent blending of theory and practice in a meaningful way through an egocentric promotion of 'the pracademic' as an entitled knowledge producer. Indeed, he asserted that setting the academic and practical worlds as parallel in this way, contains the debateable assertion of the pracademic as somehow a higher order; that is, of making a claim to expertise that is not available to a single group (i.e., the academic or practitioner) (see [28] for a further critique). In keeping with the above appraisal, we consider that the key question is not to pursue the issues of the pracademic, or any other equally dualistic term, but to consider how coaching research can improve the conditions for, and the work of, coaches, athletes, and communities of education.

Perhaps a place to start here is to remind that much of what postulates itself as coaching theory, particularly since the aforementioned social turn, has arisen out of practice itself. Such practice, as opposed to some decontextualised models or concepts, relates to how coaches navigate with great skill the ethico-political relationships and social worlds that they did not particularly design [12]. Indeed, in many ways, coaching has been quite extensively studied, described, and interpreted as a 'local order phenomenon' (directed predominantly towards athlete development), featuring a dynamic interaction between and amongst context, experience, feeling, and intention [12,33]. Despite its rigorous undertaking, perhaps the issue at hand that feeds the current strand of anti-intellectualism, is that people do not consider such 'social knowledge' as critical or necessary to practice. As articulated by Shapiro [34] (in defence of the social sciences):

“...if people know nothing about quantum mechanics or medieval literature, they are generally aware of their ignorance, readily admit it, and understand that the remedy for their ignorance is serious and systematic study. When, however, the subject is why people behave the way they do, the situation is different. Confusing their folk beliefs with knowledge, people typically don't realize their ignorance” (p. 2).

Despite the quality and depth of the aforementioned work, it appears that we (still) need to make the case more persuasively, that is, to increasingly position the study of coaching complete with “inherent contradictions, ambivalences and emancipatory tendencies” [35] (p. 19) at the twin hearts of consciousness and relevancy. The quest thus continues “to put personal and others' knowing into a form of knowledge” [12] (p. 3). This, of course, is not to say that all that is needed is mere recorded description. Rather, a degree of insightful reflexive interpretation is also needed to make better sense of how culturally influenced actors constantly (re)negotiate their accounting practices in relation to each other (e.g., coaches and athletes) and the general contextual intention [36]. The purpose then is to go beyond or beneath the surface of coaching, to examine the familiar as not being necessarily the known. In doing so, it can throw increased light on the 'non-logical logics' of coaching action through deconstructing and dispelling the fog of taken-for-granted knowledge [12,35].

This, however, is not to claim that one 'gold standard' theory can somehow match or map the totality of coaching. Neither should we consider such writings as propositions to be tested as some things we make before we investigate (according to Martin, “we already have a fine word for that, prejudice!” [37] (p. 4). Rather, echoing the point made previously, we should firstly ground our considerations in thorough empirical reference,

before (or simultaneously) undertaking 'orthological work' in relation to them [37]. Such an analysis not only contains a rigorous critique about the consistency of suggestions, but also, and primarily, the application of sincere reflexive reasoning as to their formulation. What we advocate is that those who work within coaching (be they coaches, athletes, coach educators, or scholars) employ similar 'honest' reasoning to critically engage with the evidence-base constructed to date in terms of representing the social phenomenon at hand. Such commitment to the realpolitik would no doubt assist in confirming the indivisibility of theory and practice.

3. Towards a Brave, New Coaching World: How to Live through Theory

The idea of practice simply emerging, or taking place, as something separate from purpose is misleading. Taken as such, practice is always guided by something, it is always related to, and enacted in terms of, an intention. In turn, such an intention or motivation is influenced by a developed normative approach of how to navigate the social world (or in coaching, the world of athlete development). Indeed, as argued above, it is from an examination of such everyday events and the subsequent general propositions developed through connecting related axioms, that social theory has emerged. Accepting then, that an interplay exists between empiricism and rationality, following Kant, the point made is that knowledge is not derived exclusively from either position. Hence, while empiricists often oppose the rationalists' accounts of how reason is the primary source of concepts or knowledge, they also generally believe that a reflective understanding can and usually does supply some of the missing links [38]. Similarly, rationalists do not suppose that one's knowledge is acquired independently of *any* experience; but can, and generally is, used to think with to further knowledge generation [38]. Through engaging with the concepts subsequently presented, we believe that coaches can make increasingly considered, insightful, and focussed decisions about their practice, and why they consider them so.

3.1. Using Sensitizing Concepts

Following from the above, we initially suggest Blumer's [16] treatise, that although concept development should be sought, and utilised, such ideas should come from the "living, breathing empirical world in question", and not from "Professors' armchairs" [15] (p. 4). This is because such concepts offer a more "concrete connection to the language and meaning of everyday life" (p. 4); a language meant to better understand related goings on [15]. Having said that, although he championed 'up close' empirical practice, Blumer nevertheless appreciated the necessity of theoretical formation and its further use, claiming that without such positionings, social science would be "like a train without tracks [39] (p. 115). In agreement, we similarly consider that by overly focussing on the 'doing', we tend to develop practitioners with weak conceptual overviews. Such coaches appear forever mired in the busyness of the immediate and the everyday, which keeps them from *seeing* and *understanding* the social within the personal. Hence, an engagement with theory (however loose that may be) should be considered as liberating in terms of enabling a different sense-making of the socio-pedagogical coaching world. The role of care-full, distant analytical thought then, was in relation to insightful reflexive scepticism on what was seen as witnessed 'on the ground'.

In making the case for sensitising concepts (principally as a guide and direction for research), Van den Hoonaard [40] presented them, not so much as ideas to be tested against (i.e., 'desensitising concepts'), but as means to "open up avenues of possibilities" [15] (p. 19). In this way, raw empiricism or the doing of practice could, or should, be guided by an idea or broad intention. Faulkner [41], in turn, considered such concepts as directly emanating from the literature as opposed to continually being created anew, thus emphasising that existing concepts can loosely pilot as well as result from practice. To emphasise, what we are advocating here is not some grand theorisation, but what Becker [42] termed a 'general theoretical orientation', with the notions comprising it arising out of insightful analysis of what we already, or do not quite yet, know. Specifically, the latter should be informed by a

relative dissatisfaction with current notions, whilst, more significantly, the former should be grounded in resonating ideas from existing ethnographic work leading to their personal internalisation and interpretation. It is a form of ‘disciplined imagination’, which leads to an interplay between taking, and further making, sensitising concepts [41,42]. Again, the purpose here is to demonstrate the incongruity of the theory–practice binary.

Blumer also distinguished between the agency *of* and the agency *over* the concept. The former relates to the power of the idea over the practitioner (in Blumer’s case, the sociologist, but in ours, the coach), while the latter refers to the influence of the practitioner to act upon the concept [17]. Although both have merit in relation to the case made in this paper, we prefer the idea of the concept living through or enacted authentically by coaches. This would be as opposed to forcefully using a given theory in practice, or of any instrumental use where one concept would be used before being simply replaced by another (as often crudely represented in the ‘toolbox’ analogy common to much coaching parlance). The objective is to reflexively absorb an idea into one’s practice, not to some unreflective socialisation, but as a conscious infusion to enrich and develop that practice. It is akin to an ‘assembling’ and ‘deducing’ of the doing of coaching from an informed guiding viewpoint. Consequently, the knowledge and grasp of existing sensitizing concepts can be considered fundamental aspects of occupational socialisation into coaching. Having said that, to know them is one thing, to know how to use them is another, with their improvised use being the mark of a seasoned practitioner [41].

The principal point to be made is that both theory and practice, the abstraction and the action, are not only intertwined but essentially relate to, and symbiotically develop, the same phenomenon. Practice comes from some previous idea or concept of what and how to practice, while theory is derived from an insightful sensemaking of that practice. This admission or knowledge about how concepts originate, develop, and are refined needs more widespread publication and recognition; that is, how conceptual and theoretical work shapes and is shaped by the doing of the activity. It is better to articulate this process than through methodological detail and prescription, or some ‘theory mystique’, which further constructs and maintains the current divide [15].

3.2. Vygotsky’s Dialectical ‘River’ and (Further) Notions of Internalisation

An alternative, although related, framework to engage with here is Lev Vygotsky’s ‘dialectical river’. It was a construct through which Vygotsky sought to overcome the Cartesian dualism of theory (which he termed the scientific) and everyday practice. The purpose was to merge opposing views into a continuous whole in order to both better conceptualise and subsequently drive the utilisation of new knowledge. Earlier work has argued for the salience of such dialectical relations for sports coaches [43], where clear concept formation was considered to result from an interaction between everyday (spontaneous) notions and more formal scientific ones. As Vygotsky [44] explained:

“In working its slow way upward, an everyday concept clears a path for the scientific concept and its downward development. . . [it] gives it body and vitality. Scientific concepts, in turn, supply structures for the upward development of spontaneous concepts toward conscious and deliberate use” (p. 194).

If too much attention is paid to the concrete, then no conceptual or transformational thinking is possible, whilst if abstraction is overemphasised, insufficient attention is given to on-the-ground experience. Again, to divorce practice and theory makes little sense whichever way we look at it: theory emerging from a critical analysis of practice, which then shapes future action. Both have to be respected and carefully symbiotically utilised for optimal understanding and learning to take place [43].

A further Vygotskian idea to engage with here is that of internalisation, whereby external operations, social interactions, and culture are seemingly co-opted and adopted [43]. In taking issue with what they defined as the inside–outside fallacy, Lawrence and Valsiner [45] thus defined ‘internalization’ as the process by which “meanings held out by social structures and others are brought into the individual’s thinking” (p. 95). This process, however,

was considered as bidirectional, with its reciprocal process of 'externalization' involving a movement back into the social environment of material that had become personal [45]. In building upon Valsiner and Lawrence's [45] belief that things from the world do not simply come into the mind, but rather that individuals derive meanings or make sense of the social world, Toomela [46] conceptualised the process of internalisation as being a developmental one, allowing for the emergence of new mental structures. In this sense, internalisation was not viewed as mere reproduction or a mechanical transition, but instead a creative process interacting with culture, be that from dealings with others, written materials, or other such artifacts [47]. Such a conceptualisation again emphasized the bidirectional movement claimed and, hence, the misconception of separating the internal from the external, and the sequential movement of knowledge from one realm or domain to the other. Perhaps, as Radford [48] stated, the important thing to realise is that the learner or the subject is not a given entity; hence, what we are considering is "not a simple encounter of a ready-made subject with some external (cultural–historical) knowledge" [48] (p. 72). Rather, that the learner, whilst constituted and 'transformed' through encountered knowledge, simultaneously impacts upon the features of that knowledge, which again speaks to the indivisibility of action.

This was the perspective advocated by Leontev who, in building on Vygotsky's earlier writings, considered internalisation not as "the transferral of an external activity to a pre-existing, internal 'plane of consciousness' [but rather, the] process [by] which this internal plane [itself] is formed" [49] (p. 163). Taken as such, internalisation means more than just learning something new, but is rather akin to creating a specific realm of action "that yields additional possibilities for adaptation" (Arievitch and van der Veer [50] (p. 116)). As a result, and further taking issue with the internal–external dichotomy, a somewhat reconceptualisation of internalisation can be considered as the development of meaningful external material activity into concrete 'internal' mental forms of the same activity [50]. Echoing the conclusion of Galperin (another neo-Vygotskian) then, in emphasising the indivisibility of the internal–external (i.e., the theory–practice) position, it is claimed that mental processes themselves can or should be viewed as activities carried out by an individual when engaging with an external object (e.g., knowledge) with the intention, or on the basis, of ideal actions.

3.3. Ideas from Existentialist Authenticity: 'Living Your Words'

Today, the concept of authenticity, or of just 'being authentic', is usually considered as something an individual just performs or is requested to do (as in the common call to 'just be who you are' or 'just be yourself'). The problem here, as presented by much sociological, e.g., [51,52], as well as existentialist thought, e.g., [42], in contrast to egocentric psychological perspectives, is that there is no 'core self' intrinsic to one's being. Indeed, following the related belief that we are who we are from the outside in (i.e., largely created from our responses to experience, hence emphasising the social encultured origin of the human mind), there is no personal single reference point to 'just be oneself' precisely because that self is not yet defined. Alternatively, the idea of authenticity advocated by existentialism is a much more actionable way of living. This is because it is related to first creating an authentic self, before living in accordance with that self. To be an existentialist then, is to bring one's personal philosophy (that is, the guiding principles by which one proclaims to live) into everyday life. Hence, rather than *having* abilities, our lives can only make sense, and are available to us, as a result of our openness to the world. It is a belief aligned with Heidegger's idea of authenticity as determining one's own 'potentiality-for-Being' [19], and to the idea to live in the essence one has created for oneself. For most of the time, however, such a potential (or Dasein) exists in an inauthentic manner, expressed through the uncritical taken-for-granted [53].

Consequently, the concept of authenticity relates to a reflective awakening and a self-understanding of intentionality, as opposed to moving along passively within the wider ebb and flow of things [19]. The argument presented is that, because our identities are always

in question, we should be more conscious of inescapably taking a stand on who we are (or who we want to be). The purpose is, through the process of critical reflexivity alluded to above, to bring engagement with a purposeful life into greater discernible consciousness. In doing so, a sincere enactment of well-considered concepts is undertaken. In terms of the current paper, the recurring line of reasoning is towards outlining the fallacy of the binary theory–practice division as opposed to a commitment to something outside oneself that bestows an active (coaching) life with meaning. Authenticity then involves reflexively distinguishing what is worth pursuing in the social/professional context, before becoming the social embodiment of that aspiration [54]. Although taking a perspective of authenticity as primarily being about self-fulfilment, Varga [55] further advocated the imperative of such engagement in terms of developing critical and enlightened self-practice. Hence, it is through existential choices that we express ‘who we are’, and thus to constitute ourselves about what we want to align ourselves with and stand for. Similarly, for Rings [56], we have to choose what we are to be committed to in light of an acknowledgment of personal history, intention, and present context. The important consideration for our position in this paper, and where we take issue with some existentialist thought [55], is that such an ‘awakening’ cannot simply come from some personal rumination or innate introspective act alone. This is because the most likely outcome from such deliberations would be a decision to behave in more socially valued ways such as being more ‘altruistic’, ‘selfless’, ‘adventurous’, or ‘considerate’. The point here, then, is not to valorise a commitment to be increasingly self-reflective or aware [56], but rather that an authentic existence should come from a careful contemplation of external knowledge (e.g., some theoretical writings) about what sort of life one would want to live, and how to do it. Naturally, if one is not aware of the (conceptual) options, one cannot engage with the required action(s). Indeed, here lies the principal connective tissue between Blumer’s ‘sensitising concepts’, Vygotsky’s internalisation, and the notion of ‘authenticity’ as derived from existential thought. It is an admission that one’s thinking needs to be intended or directed towards something(s), with such a thing or meaning only being recognised through reflexive engagement with and through critical theorisation [9].

4. Conclusions

The principal purpose of this paper was to take issue with the problematic ‘othering’ nature of a theory–practice division, and the resulting binary practitioner–scholar identities, evident within sports coaching. The progressive case made, however, goes further than merely highlighting the fragmentation. Rather, theoretical writings related to ‘sensitizing concepts’, ‘internalisation’, and existentialist ‘authenticity’ are presented as liberating in terms of realising intended practice. Naturally, in borrowing from such existing notions, any claims to originality must naturally be moderated. Having said that, following Cropley [57], we do consider that the perspective offered within the paper possesses a strong possibility to propel the field in a novel direction. This is because not only can it be considered as ‘redirection’ (where the known is extended on a new path), or ‘conceptual replication’ (where the known is transferred to a fresh setting), but also, and perhaps most obviously, as ‘synthesis’ (where ideas previously regarded as unrelated or not even considered are integrated) [57,58]. In doing so, we consider that the paper holds both general and specific implications for practice, through offering a reconceptualisation of the relationship between external and internal processes.

Of particular or additional relevance to the case made is that of consciousness, and is perhaps another point of the departure from previous, general notions offered. Hence, we consider the use of sensitizing concepts, internalisation and authenticity, not as implicit or quasi-aware means of enculturation, but as pressed into the service of conscious development and learning. Indeed, it is within athlete learning, as the core component or structural essence of coaching, that the argument contained in this article is situated. In this respect, and borrowing a term from phenomenology, it is towards such an end that the intentionality of the paper is directed. Learning, in turn, is considered as a cognisant

forward movement to “grasp something that lies before us” ([37], p. 79). The process here involves more than mere reflection (on self and action); instead, what is advocated is a radical self-reflective consciousness [59] in relation to who one is, who one wants to be, and how to reach that point of self. This equates to a critical deliberate consideration of the ideas placed before coaches, not just in terms of their ease of understanding or ‘accessibility’, but to such ideas’ resonance with the doing of the job. No doubt, this may well make several within the field uncomfortable (including both scholars and coaches) emanating from a degree of ‘theoretical’-related anxiety—a kind of ‘troublesome knowledge’ which undermines previous beliefs and truth claims [8,60]. Not to engage with and advocate such thinking and action, however, would continue the deceit previously alluded to [12].

Alternatively, conceptualising learning as the subjective transformation of knowledge into consciousness, as opposed to a linear process rooted in a Cartesian dualism, holds considerable potential to dismantle the harmful theory–practice dichotomy which currently bedevils coaching (and coach education). It is an argument, of course, that could (and perhaps should) be applied to several other fields and occupations, as touched upon in the introduction. Indeed, this is where the primary significance of the paper lies; that is, in its utility to other fields bedevilled by similar struggles. In doing so, a considerable degree of anti-intellectualism can be addressed whilst also reminding scholars (again) in general, and in this (coaching) case, in particular, that research should better reflect the everyday existence of practice as opposed to blindly following through on some already decided upon frameworks.

In memoriam of William George ‘Bill’ Taylor, who knew and lived this stuff.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.L.J., C.L.T.C. and G.L.T.; writing—original draft preparation, R.L.J., C.L.T.C. and G.L.T.; writing—review and editing, R.L.J. and C.L.T.C.; project administration, R.L.J. and C.L.T.C.; funding acquisition, NA. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank Professor David Brown for encouraging this work through the Qualitative Research Methods and Social Theory Group at Cardiff Metropolitan University. We also extend thanks to the peer-reviewers, whose critique was helpful to develop the paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Ketter, J.; Stoffel, B. Getting Real: Exploring the perceived disconnect between education theory and practice in teacher education. *Stud. Teach. Educ.* **2008**, *4*, 129–142. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
2. Herrmann, R. The Disconnect Between Theory and Practice in a Visual Culture Approach to Art Education. *Art Educ.* **2004**, *58*, 41–46. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Bučar, K.; Van Rheenen, D.; Hendija, Z. Ecolabelling in tourism: The disconnect between theory and practice. *Tourism* **2019**, *67*, 365–374.
4. Saifan, A.; Devadas, B.; Daradkeh, F.; Abdel-Fattah, H.; Aljabery, M.; Michael, L.M. Solutions to bridge the theory-practice gap in nursing education in the UAE: A qualitative study. *BMC Med. Educ.* **2021**, *21*, 490. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Rolfe, G. The theory-practice gap in nursing: From research-based practice to practitioner-based research. *J. Adv. Nurs.* **1998**, *28*, 672–679. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
6. Jones, R.L.; Wallace, M. Another bad day at the training ground: Coping with ambiguity in the coaching context. *Sport Educ. Soc.* **2005**, *10*, 119–134. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
7. Jones, R.L.; Armour, K.M. (Eds.) *Sociology of Sport: Theory and Practice*; Addison Wesley Longman: London, UK, 2000.
8. Jones, R.L. How can educational concepts inform sports coaching? In *The Sports Coach as Educator: Re-Conceptualising Sports Coaching*; Jones, R.L., Ed.; Routledge: London, UK, 2006; pp. 3–13.
9. Madison, D. *Soyini Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics and Performance*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2005.
10. Potter, J.; Wetherall, M. *Discourse and Social Psychology*; Sage: London, UK, 1987.

11. Kant, E. *Critique of Pure Reason*; Penguin Classics: London, UK, 2003.
12. Jones, R.L. *Studies in Sports Coaching*; Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle, UK, 2019.
13. Cushion, C.J.; Griffiths, M.; Armour, K. Professional coach educators in-situ: A social analysis of practice. *Sport Educ. Soc.* **2019**, *24*, 533–546. [CrossRef]
14. McGregor, A. The Anti-Intellectual Coach: The Cultural Politics of College Football Coaching from the New Left to the Present. *J. Sport Soc. Issues* **2022**. [CrossRef]
15. Puddephatt, A.J.; Shaffir, W.; Kleinknecht, S.W. *Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2009.
16. Blumer, H. What is wrong with social theory? *Am. Sociol. Rev.* **1954**, *19*, 146–158. [CrossRef]
17. Latour, B. *Science in Action*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1987.
18. Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA, USA, 1978.
19. Magrini, J.M. 'Anxiety' in Heidegger's Being and Time: The Harbinger of Authenticity. Philosophy Scholarship. 2006. Available online: <http://dc.cod.edu/philosophypub/15> (accessed on 1 January 2020).
20. Pollner, M. Left of Ethnomethodology: The Rise and Decline of Radical Reflexivity. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* **1991**, *56*, 370–380. [CrossRef]
21. Jones, R.L.; Ronglan, L.T. What do coaches orchestrate? Unravelling the 'quiddity' of practice. *Sport Educ. Soc.* **2018**, *23*, 905–915. [CrossRef]
22. Bourdieu, P.; Wacquant, L. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*; Polity Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1992.
23. Jones, R.L.; Potrac, P.; Cushion, C.; Ronglan, L.T. (Eds.) *The Sociology of Sports Coaching*; Routledge: London, UK, 2011.
24. Stones, R. Introduction. In *Key Sociological Thinkers*; Stones, R., Ed.; McMillan: London, UK, 1998; pp. 1–18.
25. Eisner, E. Foreword. In *Theory and Concepts in Qualitative Research*; Flinders, D.J., Mills, G.E., Eds.; Teachers College Press: New York, NY, USA, 1993.
26. Madison, D.S. Performing theory/embodied writing. *Text Perform. Q.* **1999**, *19*, 107–124. [CrossRef]
27. Jones, R.L.; Denison, J.; Corsby, C. Editorial: In the interest of discussion, debate, and future possibilities. *Sports Coach. Rev.* **2022**. [CrossRef]
28. Eacott, S. Pracademia: An answer but not the answer to an enduring question. *J. Prof. Cap. Community* **2021**, *7*, 57–70. [CrossRef]
29. Dickinson, J.; Fowler, A.; Griffiths, T.L. Pracademics? Exploring transitions and professional identities in higher education. *Stud. High. Educ.* **2020**, *47*, 290–304. [CrossRef]
30. Netolicky, D.M. Q&A with Deborah Netolicky. In *Lead the Change Series*; Weiner, J., Ed.; AERA Educational Change Special Interest Group, 2021; Volume 116, pp. 1–8.
31. Kuhn, T. Negotiating boundaries between scholars and practitioners. *Manag. Commun. Q.* **2002**, *16*, 106–112. [CrossRef]
32. Collins, L.; Collins, D. The role of 'pracademics' in education and development of adventure sport professionals. *J. Adventure Educ. Outdoor Learn.* **2019**, *19*, 1–11. [CrossRef]
33. Flyvberg, B. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2001.
34. Shapiro, J. From Sociological Illiteracy to Sociological Imagination. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; Section: Opinion & Ideas; 2000; p. A68. Available online: <http://chronicle.com> (accessed on 2 January 2016).
35. Gardiner, M.E. *Critiques of Everyday Life*; Routledge: London, UK, 2000.
36. Jones, R.L. Dilemmas, maintaining 'face' and paranoia: An average coaching life. *Qual. Inq.* **2006**, *12*, 1012–1021. [CrossRef]
37. Martin, J.L. *Thinking through Theory*; W.W. Norton & Co.: New York, NY, USA, 2015.
38. Markie, P.; Folescu, M. Rationalism vs. Empiricism. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; Zalta, E.N., Ed.; 2021; Available online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/rationalism-empiricism/> (accessed on 22 March 2023).
39. Blumer, H. Science without concepts. *Am. J. Sociol.* **1931**, *56*, 515–533. [CrossRef]
40. Van den Hoonaard, W.C. On developing an using concepts in an Icelandic field-research setting. In *Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field*; Puddephatt, A., Shaffir, W., Kleinknecht, S.W., Eds.; Routledge: Oxon, UK, 1996; pp. 92–104.
41. Faulkner, R. Improvising on sensitising concepts. In *Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field*; Puddephatt, A., Shaffir, W., Kleinknecht, S.W., Eds.; Routledge: Oxon, UK, 2009; pp. 79–91.
42. Becker, H. *Art Worlds*; University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 1982.
43. Jones, R.L.; Thomas, G.L.L.; Nunes, R.L.; Viotto Filho, T. The importance of history, language, change and challenge: What Vygotsky can teach sports coaches. *Mot. J. Phys. Educ.* **2018**, *24*, e1018166. [CrossRef]
44. Vygotsky, L. Thinking and speech (N. Minick, trans.). In *The collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky. Problems of General Psychology*; Plenum Press: New York, NY, USA, 1987; Volume 1, pp. 39–285.
45. Lawrence, J.A.; Valsiner, J. Conceptual roots of internalization: From transmission to transformation. *Hum. Dev.* **1993**, *36*, 150–167. [CrossRef]
46. Toomela, A. How culture transforms mind: A process of internalization. *Cult. Psychol.* **1996**, *2*, 285–305. [CrossRef]
47. Zittoun, T.; Gillespie, A. Internalization: How culture becomes mind. *Cult. Psychol.* **2015**, *21*, 477–491. [CrossRef]
48. Radford, L. *The Theory of Objectification: A Vygotskian Perspective on Knowing and Becoming in Mathematics Teaching and Learning*; BRILL: Boston, MA, USA, 2021.
49. Leont'ev, A.N. *Problems of the Development of Mind*; Progress: Moscow, Russia, 1959/1981.

50. Arieviditch, I.; van der Veer, R. Furthering the internalization debate: Gal'perin's contribution. *Hum. Dev.* **1995**, *38*, 113–126. [[CrossRef](#)]
51. Durkheim, E. *Les Formes Élémentaires de la vie Religieuse: Le Système Totémique en Australie [Elementary Forms of Religious Life: Totemic System in Australia]*; Quadrige/PUF: Paris, France, 1932/1985.
52. Mead, G.H. *Mind, Self, and Society*; Chicago University Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1934.
53. Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*; HarperCollins: New York, NY, USA, 1962.
54. Guignon, C. Authenticity. *Philos. Compass* **2008**, *3*, 277–290. [[CrossRef](#)]
55. Varga, S. *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2012.
56. Rings, M. Authenticity, self-fulfillment, and self-acknowledgment. *J. Value Inq.* **2017**, *51*, 475–489. [[CrossRef](#)]
57. Cropley, A. The myths of heaven-sent creativity: Toward a perhaps less democratic but more down-to-earth understanding. *Creat. Res. J.* **2016**, *28*, 238–246.
58. Sternberg, R.J.; Kaufman, J.C.; Pretz, J.E. *The Creativity Conundrum: A Propulsion Model of Kinds of Creative Contributions*; Psychology Press: New York, NY, USA, 2002.
59. Sartre, J.-P. *Being and Nothingness*; Routledge: London, UK, 1969.
60. Meyer, J.H.F.; Land, R. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (1): Linkages to ways of thinking and practicing within the disciplines. In *Improving Students Learning: Ten Years on*; OCSLD: Oxford, UK, 2003.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.