

# Learner-Centered Coach Development: Re-envisioning the Coaching Practice Through a Humanistic Lens

Brianna Welch, Cam Kiosoglou, Jody Langdon, Sarah McQuade

## Background and Introduction

Humanistic coaching focuses on promoting holistic growth, personal fulfillment and athlete success through empowering participants and reinforcing a positive and healthy coach-athlete relationship. Four main behaviors characterize this approach:

- Encouraging autonomy; letting go of control and adopting a facilitative approach
- Providing opportunities for problem solving
- Personalizing the coaching process; setting goals that are individualized to the players needs
- Building positive coach-athlete relationship by being understanding, supportive and open to thoughts and emotions<sup>1</sup>

Sports can be a positive and empowering space for athletes to develop confidence, agency, self-worth all the while improving their athletic performance, or it can feel detached, enhance anxiety and be harmful to the development of a healthy sense of self.

Coaches have a unique opportunity to shape their student-athletes' psychological growth and play an active role in enhancing mental well-being.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the web of challenges that athletes are facing (emotional, social, mental etc.), supporting them in tapping into their intrinsic drive and helping them to navigate their athletic identity can be complicated. Often, coaches and administrators do not have the resources or background knowledge to feel prepared to support athletes in this way. Traditionally, these areas might not have fit into definition of a quality coach however as the athletic climate and athlete experiences evolves the definition **of what it means to be a quality coach is shifting as well**. While technical knowledge is essential for teaching sport specific skills, coaches' ability to create and maintain relationships (interpersonal) and learn from one's own practice (intrapersonal) is equally, if not more important.

This evolving view of what it means to be a quality coach has prompted coach developers to:

1. **Reconsider the coaching characteristics needed to best support the whole athlete; adopting a humanistic lens (the what) and,**
2. **Reconceptualize coach education through a learner centered approach to more effectively support coaches in their personal and professional development (the how)<sup>3</sup>**

For coaches to be more effective in their role it is necessary that they are provided with a coach education experience that integrates both elements. Through our program, *Coaching the Whole Athlete*, we fostered a reflective environment that allowed coaches to be their authentic self and prompted them to consider their current approach as well as the impact of adopting humanistic coaching elements. Combined with a delivery approach that incorporated numerous learner-centered components such as personalizing the experience to each coaches' needs and allowing them agency in the learning process, we were able to effectively support them in developing the confidence to address the holistic needs of their athletes and create a more empowering athletic climate for their athletes to thrive.

## Participant Info & Guiding Questions

Participants included:

43 coaches, across three cohorts:

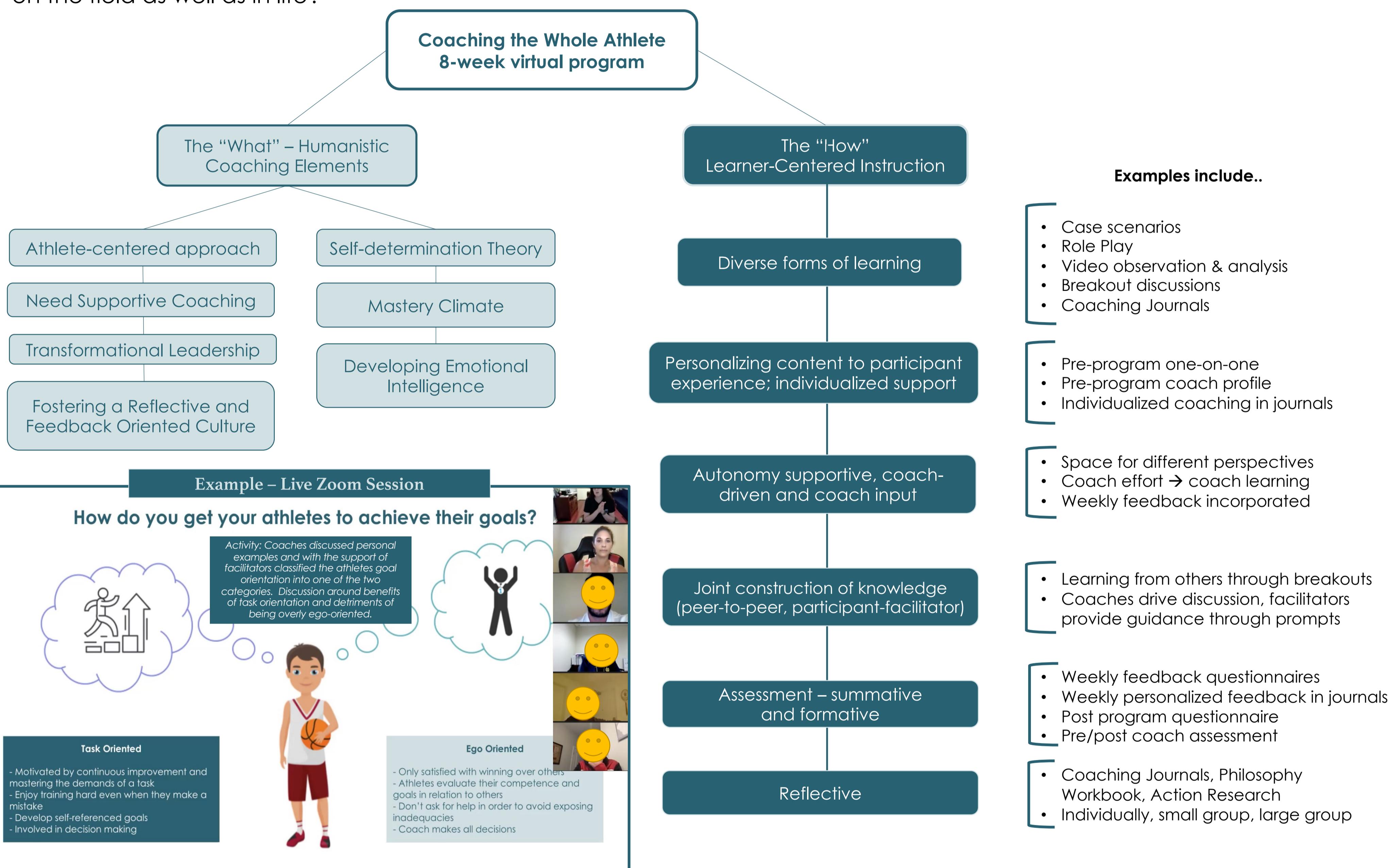
- High school coaches
- Club coaches
- College coaches in a power five conference
- Sports coached included basketball, soccer, rowing, gymnastics, swimming, track and field, football, wrestling, softball among others
- Coaches' years of experience varied from two years to over thirty years
- Diverse representation of coaching positions ranging from assistant coaches on the junior varsity high school level to head coaches on the Division I level
- 22 women and 21 men

### Guiding Questions

- **Content** - How did participants' perspective on effective coaching change from pre to post program? Were participants more likely to view through a humanistic lens from pre to post?
- **Delivery & Instruction** – How did the participants' experience of the program, as demonstrated through coaching journals, pre and post one-on-ones and questionnaires, confirm or refute a learner-centered instructional approach?

## Program Design

Coaching the Whole Athlete is an 8-week virtual and immersive coach development program that combines asynchronous and synchronous instruction. The focal point of the program is 90min weekly zoom sessions supplemented by journal reflections and weekly instructor feedback, pre-post coach assessments and pre-post one-on-ones with facilitators among other interactive elements. Grounded in reflective practice, the program utilizes these methods to prompt coaches to consider: "How can we evolve our attitude, practices and relationship with our athletes to create a supportive and empowering space for them to excel on the field as well as in life?"



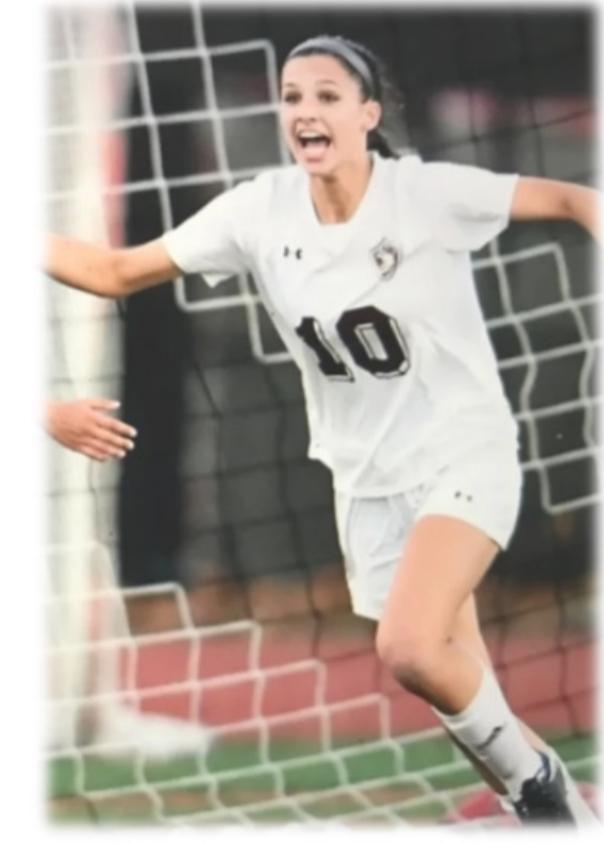
### Program Mission

Within our athletic and educational institutions, we can more effectively engage our coaches in a process of personal and professional growth through learner-centered and reflective programming.

During this experience coaches will acquire the knowledge and skills to build more positive coach-athlete relationships, address the needs of the whole athlete and cultivate empowering climates for each individual to thrive.

### Sample Workshop Focus

#### W3: Supporting and Motivating Your Athletes



"Most useful thing I learned was where motivation is derived from and the process that goes into it. I feel I can apply so much of it to my coaching practices because now that I understand the different types and the order of operations, I can gear my focus toward feeding those needs."

## Program Feedback

### Adopting a humanistic Approach

"My philosophy as a coach has been to not care about an individual's why so much, I figured it was a personal thing and if you needed someone to help with your why, you were more than likely in the wrong place. I'm beginning to understand that athletes today take their cues (good or bad) from coaches' way more than in the past."

"This has been very eye opening in terms of the coach-athlete dialogue aspect. Instead of judging an athlete for what they say, attempting to learn who they are through what they say is much more important."

"All the different areas of emotional intelligence are important to understand and be cognizant about while coaching. This workshop helped me to identify areas in which I feel the most growth could take place (social awareness and conflict management)."

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### Learner-centered instruction

"I learned/was reminded that self improvement is a lifelong journey and must be a continuous decision each day to look in the mirror, be honest with yourself, and continue evolving"

"Yes, I was able to contribute with my own perspective. I used examples of how I have developed a meaningful, yet simplistic, coaching philosophy in recent years because I was going through job searches."

"It definitely challenged me to think about my evolution, current philosophy, and my ideals/why/and how."

"Getting the real-world use for the scores of the test we took prior to starting the course was an eye opener. Its the kind of feedback/data that I think most coaches crave in an effort to improve."

"I really enjoy having the time to reflect. I have been catching up over the last week and have enjoyed how the material is presented-as it makes it easy to find connections to everyday coaching."

"The breakout sessions, subsequent debrief and the coaching journal are the two strong suits of this workshop for me as a whole. The interaction provides great amounts of information"

## Discussion and Future Work

### Impact of program (from post program conversations and post program survey). Coaches:

- Identified concrete elements of athlete-centered coaching that they have already implemented or will implement with their athletes
- Recognized the impact of continually engaging in reflective practice to further their personal and professional growth and implemented new practices to build their self-awareness
- Utilized athlete one-on-ones, athlete profiles and questionnaires to provide space for athlete voice and to reinforce a culture of feedback.
- Confirmed that they were encouraged to bring in their personal experience and were provided the autonomy to shape their learning/use their voice

### Future Work

- Larger scale examination of effectiveness of the workshop
- Follow up surveys with coaches to see what they have implemented with their teams
- Additional demographics to better characterize the impact of the program
- Coaching Philosophy Presentation Rubric (incorporating athlete-centered, humanistic elements)
- Additional quantitative outcomes/data from completed pre and post coach assessments

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2. Côté, J., & Gilbert, W. (2009). An Integrative Definition of Coaching Effectiveness and Expertise, International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 4(3), 307-323. <https://doi.org/10.1260/17479540978923892>

3. Paquette, K., & Trudel, P. (2018). Learner-Centered Coach Education: Practical Recommendations for Coach Development Administrators, International Sport Coaching Journal, 5(2), 169-175. Retrieved Nov 10, 2021, from <https://journals.human kinetics.com/view/journals/isci/5/2/article-p169.xml>