

Experts or Expertise? A Response to Otte, Yearby and Myszka (2024)

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Abstract

In 2024 Otte, Yearby, and Myszka published an article arguing for Skill Acquisition Specialists to be incorporated into high-performance sport, and they then responded further in 2026 (Myszka et al.) to Fransen who questioned their position. In this brief commentary we discuss the position presented by Otte et al., not so much to argue against it, but rather to extend their view and consider it from another perspective—practice theory. In this, we argue that what is needed is not ‘skill acquisition’ experts per se, but ‘skill acquisition’ expertise.

Keywords

skill acquisition specialist, coaching, practice theory, learning, theory of practice architectures

Introduction

In recent years there has been increased interest in how athletes develop and grow, particularly from an *ecological dynamics* perspective. In their recent paper, Otte et al. (2024) made a case for teams to have, as part of their coaching staff, a ‘skill acquisition specialist’ (SAS), and then provided a thoughtful discussion about what this person might do and the qualities they may need to do the job. This paper was then discussed in some detail by the academics in the ‘Constraints Collective’ podcast where they further considered what this person might do. Here we want to present a response to this article (and podcast), not that we disagree with the thrust of the argument, but rather to extend and perhaps consider the key points from a different perspective. Specifically, we will take an ontological practice theory perspective to build upon their arguments. In essence, our fundamental tenet is that athletes do not need a

‘skill acquisition specialist’ per se, but rather they need coaching practices that are shaped by sound skill acquisition knowledge, language, and principles. In other words, athletes do not need a ‘skill acquisition’ expert, but rather ‘skill acquisition expertise.’ Also, we should say that for us, like the authors of the article and the discussants on the podcast, we think the term ‘skill acquisition’ is problematic and misrepresentative of skill learning, but nevertheless, we will use it for consistency with the original article.

Practice Theory

Before we elaborate on a practice theory perspective on coaching and skill acquisition, we will elaborate briefly on practice theory itself, and here, specifically, the theory of practice architectures (TPA)¹. Our lives are

lived in practices, which are social and situated human activities that unfold in time and space as we interact with one another as embodied interlocutors. This is a site-ontological view of the unfolding of life in time and space, where practices are made up of characteristic *sayings* (including thoughts and written words), *doings* (what is done), and *relatings* (how people connect with others and things) that are enabled and constrained—held in place—by site-based *practice architectures*. The practice architectures are the *cultural-discursive*, *material-economic*, and *social-political* arrangements that exist in the practice site. Thus, Kemmis et al. (2014, p.31) defined a practice as follows:

... a form of socially established cooperative human activity in which characteristic arrangements of actions and activities (*doings*) are comprehensible in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (*sayings*), and when the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (*relatings*), and when this complex of sayings, doings, and relatings ‘hangs together’ in a distinctive *project*.

This is an ontological perspective that foregrounds the situated nature of practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991), including coaching, thus foregrounding that practices happen in particular places at particular times.

What does this mean for coaching?

So, in relation to coaching, what this means is that the focus shifts to the doing of coaching, or more correctly, coaching practices, and in that sense, it de-centres the person doing the coaching per se. In simple terms, what an athlete, team, or squad needs is not so much ‘a coach’ (or coaches), but rather ‘coaching’. This is not just a semantic exercise, but it centres attention on the actual happening or occurrence

of coaching (Grootenboer et al., 2025). This means that the knowledge, experience, and expertise of the coach are all important, but only in that they shape the coaching practice, and the athlete(s) will only experience the coaches’ knowledge, expertise and experience through their coaching practice. Furthermore, coaches and athletes engage with one another through their practices (coaching practices and ‘sport’ practices) in particular places at particular times (Kemmis et al, 2014). This situated, ontological perspective is consistent with ecological understandings of skill ‘acquisition’ and learning (Kemmis et al., 2025).

To illustrate, a beach volleyball coach may have vast experiences as a player and a wealth of knowledge of the game and even principles of skill acquisition, but this knowledge and experience is important only in how it shapes their coaching practice. The players do not interact with the coach’s knowledge or experience; they encounter one another only through their coaching practice as it happens in particular sites at particular times. As an expert in beach volleyball, the coach can draw on their knowledge and experience to create practice architectures for the athletes to practice and learn beach volleyball, including cultural discursive arrangements such as instruction and cues, material economic conditions such as court set-ups and player positioning, and social and political settings that allow the players to feel confident and comfortable to try new things. These coaching practices would be informed, one would hope, by expertise in skill acquisition, whether that be from a designated SAS or from a team coach who has engaged with the work of the authors and others and developed an understanding of skill acquisition principles.

Therefore, if we lean back into the article by Otte et al. (2024), we would say that athletes, teams, squads, or clubs, do not need a ‘skill acquisition specialist’ per se, but rather they need coaching that is shaped—enabled and constrained—by skill acquisition principles, knowledge, and expertise. This may be provided by a skill acquisition specialist, but there may often be situations where this may not be the case or even possible. First, it seems that the

article by Otte et al. (2024) is referring to professional sports organizations where there is a group of coaches each with specific responsibilities, so the SAS would work across the coaching staff to help them develop coaching situations that are robust vis-à-vis athlete learning and development. However, most coaching is not conducted in this rich professional environment, and yet the need for the knowledge, expertise, and experience that a SAS would bring are equally important. Indeed, one could argue that they are more significant for coaching with young and beginning athletes, and yet in these situations there is usually one volunteer coach for the team. Second, and relatedly, there may be cases where an existing member of a coaching team in a professional environment is already strong in their understanding of skill acquisition, so a SAS may be superfluous to requirements as the expertise is already embedded in the coaching staff.

As we stated earlier, we do not disagree with the authors regarding the importance of skill acquisition expertise, but we think that there is a need to consider it in ways beyond the role of a particular person – an ‘expert’. This is particularly important if we are to see skill acquisition knowledge and expertise being influential in coaching more broadly (something with which the article authors likely do not disagree). Thus, we want to promote a site-ontological practice perspective that focuses on the ‘doing’ of coaching, rather than the particular person who may do it (i.e., here a SAS).

Coaching is all about learning.

While it has been timely for Otte et al. (2024) to raise the importance of coaching and skill acquisition, it does seem somewhat surprising that coaching more generally is not understood as fundamentally about *learning*. Of course, it is obvious that when a coach is working on particular sports-related skills then it is about skill acquisition, and hence the argument for a SAS or at least some expertise in skill acquisition is warranted. But when teams are developing team strategies, or working on ways of collaborating on the field, or coping with

pressure in the heat of a game, or ..., they are also learning, and so learning in sport is more than just mere skill acquisition (hence the plethora of coaches in professional sports teams). So, rather than just a SAS, perhaps what is needed is a ‘learning specialist’, or expertise in understanding and supporting learning in the coaching group, even if that team only has one member.

In our opinion, coaching is about creating conditions and arrangements – practice architectures, for athletes to be *stirred into* the practices of that particular sport (Grootenboer et al., 2025). This is *learning sport*, not simply *learning to play sport*. This is learning how to go on in the sport and be increasingly more immersed in the related community of practice. This is more than simply skill acquisition.

Conclusion

We welcome the arguments of Otte et al. (2024) in promoting the need for greater attention to the expertise related to learning in sport. At a general level it would seem to be at the heart of coaching. However, we have tried to extend their ideas with a focus on sport as something that occurs in time and place, and to move beyond a particular person such as a SAS, to an appreciation for coaching practices that create practice architectures for players to learn their sport. Indeed, expertise in skill acquisition is foundational to coaching, as is perhaps expertise in strength and conditioning, and game skills, tactics and rules, and so coaching practices, whether by an individual or group of coaches. Athletes need expertise rather than experts per se.

Endnote

1. For a more comprehensive outline of TPA, see Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves (2023), or see Grootenboer, Scott, & Petrie (2025) for a discussion of how it relates to learning in sport.

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