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Winfield, J.; McDonald, Kirsty

Publication date:
2011

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Citation for published version (APA):

Winfield, J., & McDonald, K. (2011). *The use of reflective practice to support mentoring of elite equestrian instructors*. Poster session presented at International Society for Equitation Science Conference, Netherlands.

The use of Reflective Practice to support Mentoring of Elite Equestrian Instructors

Winfield J.R & McDonald, K.

University of the West of England, Hartpury College, Gloucester, UK



INTRODUCTION:

Equestrian instructors are not required to undertake personalised Continual Professional Development (CPD) post qualification, except once every two years to satisfy professional body requirements. Geographical distribution of British Horse Society (BHS) instructors can lead to the feeling of isolation. Many BHS instructors are self employed and naturally protective of their commercial interests, resulting in a reluctance to share good practice with others.

Anecdotally instructors reflect in practice but this is more often related to their performance as a rider or on the performance of their horse. The ability to self-reflect as a rider or later as an instructor appears to be sub-conscious in nature. In nursing and education the process of reflection and mentoring are considered to enhance professional development (Boyd & Fales, 1993; Leyson, 2002; Young et al, 2005) and are actively scheduled into the educational development of staff. It would be a benefit to explore the concepts of self reflection and mentoring and the impact that these have on equestrian instructors.

This study aims to identify the impact and use of reflection through mentoring support to enhance elite equestrian instructor education. The objectives of the study are to evaluate an effective reflective process that can be adapted into the equestrian industry and to appraise the use and role of mentoring within a distance learning environment to elite equestrian instructors.

METHOD:

The principles of purposive sampling were implemented, the consequence of which enabled three female equestrian instructors being selected, informed of the nature of the research and invited to participate.

An initial telephone interview was conducted to explain the purpose of the study and the level of commitment that was expected from each of the participants. An outline of how the study would be conducted, through individual pre-arranged telephone conversations, concluding with a joint focus group meeting with the other participants was discussed. The reflective sheets (Table One) were provided to each of the participants so that they could use them as a personal record of reflection within their own teaching. The reflective sheets would be numbered consecutively to allow the participant recollection of the session but would have no personal details or reference to the clients that were taught, On completion of the four week study these sheets were to be returned to the researcher for analysis but not included within the study due to their confidential nature. The telephone dialogue was identified as the opportunity for the participants to discuss with the researcher their personal development and utilise the conversation as support within a mentoring capacity.

Table One: Reflective Practice Record Sheet

Date:	Number:
<i>Judgement, Decision making, Communication, Observation and Team working</i>	
Assessment of the training event: What were the training aims and were they met for either the horse and / or rider?	
Feelings: As a coach how did you feel about the session and what was the impact upon the delivery to the rider / horse? What did you think?	
Evaluation: Was this progression or consolidation?	
Analysis: Were the Aims met? If Yes – how did this happen, what did you do well?	
If No, why not – safety, what was the limiting factors?	
Conclusion: Relate the achievement to the Aims of the rider. How else could this outcome have been achieved?	
Action Plan: Would this session be repeatable because it was Good / Structured.	
What added value could be brought to future sessions?	

Table Two: Results: Reflective Themes

Raw data themes	Higher Order Themes	Emergent Themes
Disciplined Formality	Tactic knowledge	Conscious awareness
Unconsciously aware Develop awareness Positive / negative awareness Direction / directive	Arrogance Unconscious competence	
Benefit to clients Learning from experience Adjustments Commercialism	Acting Changes in practice	Image as a professional
Experience Depth of thinking Label thought Frustration	Personal evaluation Emotions	Benefit to self
User friendly Ease of paperwork Reflection on paperwork	Disciplined Structured	Practical use of sheets

Table Three: Results: Mentoring Themes

Raw data themes	Higher Order Themes	Emergent Themes
Refreshed attitude Isolation in practice Highlighted things to consider	Development Supportive	Refreshes & inspired
More confident In control Extrinsic influences Negativity	Arrogance Security	Confidence in self
Ownership Subconscious role Responsibility for own progress	Ownership of process by coach Unconscious competences	Self-mentor as coach
Liked paperwork Time scale (weekly preference) Pre-arranged Non-invasive	Short term & brief Supportive (sharing with another)	Weekly support

CONCLUSIONS:

The participants positively bought into the study and readily engaged in the reflective process. During this process the instructors stated that they developed a positive cognitive awareness of their own ability which allowed them to take responsibility for their learning and ownership of their teaching skills. The instructors considered that the mentoring process was supportive and useful in developing the ability to self-reflect through the weekly dialogues. Consequently, this led to their ability to self-mentor therefore acting as a suitable tool for CPD in this industry.

To the author's knowledge this is the first study to amalgamate reflection and mentoring in practice, specifically to this industry. In order to support the development of current equestrian coaches within the UK, the opportunity for available and interactive support for professional instructors should be provided to ensure that they can feel valued. Through their own education, the coaches can cascade and disseminate their tacit knowledge to their protégés and support future coach development and education within this theatre of practice. The work done in this study and the understanding of the limitations that have been identified would act positively as a pilot study to be refined for direct use in the BHS Coach Education system. This study concluded that both a reflective element and a mentoring process are required to effectively empower equestrian instructors and facilitate a culture of lifelong learning.

INDUSTRY APPLICATIONS:

The study process was shown to be very accessible to instructors in potentially isolated areas or those working in a freelance capacity where commercial ownership of teaching skills is important and protected.

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