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Caught between a rock and a hard place: the liminality of the sport coaching ‘pracademic’

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of “pracademics” in the field of sport coaching, individuals who blend practical coaching expertise with scientific enquiry, has garnered increasing attention. Positioned to bridge the gap between academia and practice, pracademics are expected to bring practical wisdom and contextual knowledge into scholarly activities. However, we pose the need to critically examine the concept of the pracademic, and their service to both industry and academia while sounding a note of caution in an increasingly commercialised sector. We do so by exploring the retrospective reflections of an early career researcher (the lead author) in navigating the role of pracademic in an increasingly neoliberal space. We contend that caution is needed in the blind pursuit towards the role of the pracademic, calling on greater collaborative efforts to protect early career academics, challenge neoliberal structures and for the continued engagement with thoughtful and critical research and knowledge exchange in sport coaching.

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A cautionary tale

The origins of this paper have been built upon my (the lead author) experiences within sport coaching; both on the grass, and off it. The “idea” developed during the first academic semester and the start of the competitive league season in 2022-2023, and was formalised with a Whatsapp message to the other two authors starting simply with “Hear me out . . .”. Importantly, both on the pitch and in the classroom, my activities that year felt marred by a sense of difficulty associating to my identity, role, and sense of belonging.

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Sport, and specifically football, have long been an integral part of my belonging and identity. My dad was the catalyst. Coerced into supporting at the time third division and unglamorous Burnley, and starting my goalkeeping journey at the tender age of 6 years old, it has since been twenty-two consecutive years playing or coaching at various levels within the game.

Strangely, the study of sport or coaching had never appealed to me. I never really “understood” school. I stayed in education post 16 so that I could play football full time. Yet, any fleeting dream of playing beyond the Isthmian League was quickly crushed. I studied Sport, Coaching & Physical Education to become a Physical Education teacher, academia was never part of the equation. Within the university machine I initially never felt like I belonged, I struggled with the sights, the sounds, and the practices’ of undergraduate students in a home counties University. That said, I found comfort in theory, it provided me with a language that helped me explain my sporting experiences within a world I didn’t know how to navigate.

The following years were spent observing the fractures between the academic and sport coaching world expand, as I have been pulled from the window to the wall, in pursuit of “the practising academic”. Through this journey I have tried to shape shift, often operating within the middle ground. In an attempt to better understand the questions, challenges and politics of sport coaching practice, I have tried to integrate and embellish myself within their social and cultural practices. Yet, I still did not fit. Despite knowing the practices and rituals through time spent playing, coaching and operating within football, I am still the outsider; “Prof”, “that laptop coach”. My involvement within the academe has left me cold, exposed, and vulnerable. Moving from student to academic professional, I no longer felt I was befitting of that world. In equal measure, the rules and expectations of academic research often feel alien, contrived and distant from the truth I have always felt on the grass. In this sense I feel, once again, like an outsider, never fully belonging but always existing.

“Am I actually just a bit shit at both?” I ask my co-authors. I feel the divide is finally catching up with me. I can’t find a way to make the two versions of myself fit. I can’t begin to understand either world with only a foot in each door. I’m stranded, the liminal sport coaching researcher.

Introduction

The role of “pracademics”, that is, individuals who combine practical coaching expertise with scientific inquiry, has gained increasing attention in sport coaching discourse in recent years (Collins & Collins, 2019). In respect to education, the pracademic (see Posner, 2009 for a more detailed review) is argued to more appropriately situate academic activity in context, benefitting teaching practice, heightening the applicability of scholarly activity, and improving on the ground practice (McDonald & Mooney, 2011). The pracademic emerges to satisfy the need for connection between both worlds. Specifically, Chow, Button, Lee, Morris, and Shuttleworth (2023, p. 2) note the need to “hear more

from practitioners working at the ‘coalface’ and “to gather insights from individuals who have both academic and practical experience”. Likewise, Collins and Collins (2019, p. 6) comment on how pracademics can act on practical wisdom, and effectively “links the context and knowledge”.

However, the conceptualisation of this role has largely been accepted without significant scrutiny or critical thought (Wilson, 2019). Whilst the purpose of our work is not to flippantly disregard the plight to synthesise scholarly activity and practice, a perpetuated agenda within the coaching literature (Cushion & Partington, 2016; Jones, Morgan, & Harris, 2012; North, 2017), we do contend to engage critically with the implications of a largely accepted pursuit towards the role of the pracademic. In this light, this article attempts to place greater scrutiny on the formation of pracademics, and their service to both industry and the academy, whilst calling for caution in an increasingly commercialised sector. Within our discussion, we proceed to discuss the factors surrounding the role of the pracademic, evoking the feelings experienced by the first author in opening retrospective reflective vignettes. In doing so, we offer a cautionary tale, repositioning the pracademic within the contemporary Higher Education (HE) landscape, and posing challenging questions for how sport coaching should proceed in its pursuit of research-informed practitioners.

The rise of the pracademic

The notion of the pracademic has only recently come into the lexicon of sport coaching research, with a muddled and uncertain etymological past. Believed to have first been termed 30 years ago, the term is borne out of the aspirations of many disciplines to find a meaningful intersection between academic research and on-the-ground experience (Posner, 2009; Volpe & Chandler, 2001).

Whilst critiques of this role are relatively sparse, some considerations have been acknowledged across different contexts. For example, Wilson (2019) argues that given the breadth of uses, the term may increasingly mean different things for different people, where at best being a pracademic “does not describe one identifiable group” and at worst “is too woolly to be of any use” (p. 3). Thus, questions arise as to the consistent application of the term, whilst muddled definitions and understandings persist (Powell, Winfield, Schatteman, & Trusty, 2018). Further still, Cuccia (2013) questions the conceptual utility of the “role” in crossing the divide between academics and practitioners, arguing that one cannot become fully immersed in either role and may potentially end up “dabbling” within either domain. Given its considerable rise in the public consensus, Netolicky (2020) questions

whether pracademic is just another made-up “edu-word”, acknowledging the fields attempt to quickly draw upon new *in flavour* notions.

Equally, the shifting policy and role of the university over the past several decades, from site of academic freedom and education, to one of commercialisation, governance and enterprise (Maisuria & Cole, 2017), has turned HE institutes into service providers where traditional academic disciplines must align to economic markets. Blindsided by the rise of neoliberalism, a governing social framework espousing free-market capitalism, limited government intervention, and individualism, the university has been subjected to significant organisational system changes (Bettache, Chiu, & Beattie, 2020; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Giroux, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). By consequence, this has led to the commodification of the university, with increased emphasis placed upon measurable impact representing an input-output system (Barnett, 2000). Within the HE sector in the United Kingdom, recent government intervention in university degrees has led to a significant shift towards economic kitemarks, questioning future earnings potential and professional employment rates (Department for Education, 2023). There is a very clear focus towards the need to extend beyond a traditional university education, in order to embrace the notion of employability and vocationalism.

As an Early Career Researcher (ECR) I (the first author) fell head first into the neoliberal university machine, scrutinised by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and shaped by the need for efficiency; to *publish or perish* (De Rond & Miller, 2005; Olssen & Peters, 2005). My position within HE has been moulded by a requirement to manifest the vocational nature of the sport coaching discipline, under increasing pressures from government agendas to engage in knowledge exchange and drive graduate employability metrics. Amid such pressures, I have quietly been socialised into convincing myself that I need to exist in both worlds in order to be validated as a sport coaching researcher.

As a pracademic, I am required to extend beyond the institution in order to operate within the neoliberal university. Here, the notion of the “pracademic” has been adopted commercially by the enterprising academic. Indeed, through private consultancy individuals and their companies offer services to “close the gap” by providing access to expert practical academics. The pracademic, we argue, is thus a political agent in the “phasing in” of the neoliberal university. As the university worker must fight for legitimacy, they are faced with increasing pressures to support the transition towards vocationalism, commercialisation and practicality (Olssen & Peters, 2005). As such, the pracademic is able to gain increasing legitimacy as the *voice of reason*, positioned to straddle “the gap” and speak the language of both the academy and vocational contexts.

Problematising pracademics in sport coaching research

Within sport coaching, individuals that span this gap typically do so across lecturing positions within HE institutions; whilst simultaneously working within coach development, coach education or practical coaching roles (Chow, Button, Lee, Morris, & Shuttleworth, 2023; Collins & Collins, 2019; Collins, Taylor, Ashford, & Collins, 2022). Certainly not unique to sport coaching, within a number of vocational domains there is an evident professional tension between those that do the “doing”, and those that write about it (i.e, education, medicine, and business) (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Bush, Silk, Andrews & Lauder, 2013; Prøitz & Wittek, 2020; Sethi, Ajjawi, McAleer, & Schofield, 2017). In this sense, a coach might find themselves valued as a practitioner, but less so as a theoretically informed researcher of practice (Collins & Collins, 2019); holding the opposite true for academics (Lyle & Cushion, 2010). Certainly, both facets of coaching knowledge are inextricably valuable to the progression of the field, where theory serves as a foundation to practice, and the challenges of practical application serve as the catalyst for continuous theoretical development (Lyle, 2018).

This apparent disjuncture is arguably a significant barrier to the professionalising of sports coaching (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). That said, we feel it is important to note that the existence of a theory-practice gap in sport coaching is a debated notion (Jones, Morgan, & Harris, 2012; Partington, O’Gorman, Greenough, & Cope, 2021). The intention of this paper is not to weigh in on this debate, rather it is to critically appraise an emergent agent of change heralded as the bridge, the pracademic. In making sense of this, we must first consider the contents from which this dual role emerges. Perspectives from the researcher and the practitioner differ, and each is faced by their own respective needs shaped by their environment. The practitioner is deemed to have a needs-led requirement, driven by solution or outcome-oriented questions. Equally, the purpose of the researcher may not be to provide immediately applied outcomes from scholarly work (Lyle, 2018) with importance placed on conceptual and theoretical development (Jones, 2011). Research in sport coaching has, despite its infancy, become increasingly problematised (Lyle, 2018). Bowes and Jones (2006) acknowledged coaches’ scepticism of academic research and concerns as to the relevancy to their practice. Equally, Farrow, Baker, and MacMahon (2013) reported the distinction between research outputs and the impact on coaching practice, highlighting how research tends to affirm already established knowledge, evidence is often layered with caveats and mitigating factors, and language is superfluous, reflecting that of the academy and not the industry.

This perceived research to practice gap has provided a *modus operandi* for the sport coaching pracademic. In turn, sport coaching research is

increasingly adopting a practice focused approach, channelling the assumed questions of coaches and providing solutions, models and frameworks of coaching practice (e.g. Collins, Taylor, Ashford, & Collins, 2022; O'Sullivan, Woods, Vaughan, & Davids, 2021). The focus of this paper is not to argue whether there is a gap, instead it is to address how the sport coaching pracademic is a moniker partially arising and subsequently positioning itself within the discourses surrounding the gap.

The liminality of the sport coaching 'pracademic'

By consequence to the shifting sport coaching research landscape, I have found myself in limbo, caught between the academy and the practice worlds. This position has left me vulnerable, pulled between different contexts, each with their own needs, wants and expectations on *what* it is that I do. My isolation is exacerbated by the demand of neoliberal universities for competitive individual "entrepreneurial actors" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 420). Under this ideology, a race to the bottom has started through the need to constantly demonstrate impact through research and knowledge exchange activities. This is the position I was sold in which the pracademic holds value, moving out of the traditional dogma of the academic ivory tower and into the real world as a fixer, answering questions and finding solutions. As such, pracademics have increasingly been able to access and pursue commercial streams of interest in their research in contempt of more critical and theoretically grounded research.

The perceived fixing of the practice-theory gap may well be a misnomer. As noted previously the practice-theory gap is a contested notion, but in my pursuit of pracademia I hoped to bridge it. However, once in the middle ground I didn't find the gap that was described to me. It felt as if the practice-theory gap exists only by those looking for it. Each stakeholder within the sport coaching sector has conceived this gap from their own point of view, where the field holds its own motives and habitual practices. The role for knowledge transfer from theory to practice (or vice-versa) has therefore become confused and lost in contextual complexities. The focus of research is influenced by the interests of competing organisations (e.g. National Governing Bodies) and specific special interest groups with party lines to pursue (Lyle, 2018). The pracademic, espoused to bridge this gap, has simply added another dimension to the gap. By attempting to operate and "fix" the gap, the pracademic has done no more than further substantiate the perception of the contended gap between theory and practice. Consequently, this has led to another set of motivations and interests becoming wrapped up into an already contested space. Within these nested interests has been a landscape of research outputs which are largely descriptive of the practice that currently goes on, and an uncritical acceptance and

reproduction of coaching rhetoric (Cushion & Partington, 2016). The outcome of which has often been generalised research findings that are decontextualised from the complex realities of coaching practice through the production of common-sense recommendations (Lyle, 2018).

Importantly, we are not challenging the need, and subsequent pursuit, of research that positively impacts coaching practice. Rather, we are debating the current trajectory towards uncritically accepting the notion of the pracademic in furthering sport coaching research. We accept the challenge and complexities of research dissemination, where the languages and knowledge of the academic and practice fields cannot be simply conceived (Lyle, 2018). However, in my current form as a pracademic, my existence has become liminal. Liminality is conceived as the state of emotional, physical and metaphorical being between two transitional states, between research and practice. I blindly pursued this position, sleepwalking into an impossible role, never fully existing or identifying with either side of the “gap” but contributing further to it.

What does the future hold?

Reflecting on our cautionary tale, we are overtly conscious of our positionality, that of attempting to be applied academic practitioners. The irony of the lead author’s academic job title, “Lecturer in Applied Coaching Sciences”, is not lost, and further places our own practices under the microscope. Instead, we have asked ourselves to reflect critically on our use of the term, the role it has played in our careers and the future steps for sport coaching research. First, we must challenge the role that HE institutions play in the birth, development and acceptance of the pracademic as an integral part of academic life. Shaped under the ideologue of neoliberalism, the contemporary university has influenced us to pursue impact and performance metrics, enshroud ourselves in employability quotas and aggressively fight as individual entrepreneurial spirits. Challenging these systems is no easy feat, but we believe it starts with connections, collaborations and genuine reflection on the role(s) that we play as actors within the academic performance. Second, we challenge senior academic colleagues to support ECR’s from sleepwalking into a state of liminality. Through strengthening already established routes (e.g. CRiC) and continued collaborative work, we can start to shape the narrative of the pracademic into something more befitting of providing thoughtful and critical research and knowledge exchange. Finally, we do not have the naive view that the continued synthesis of the practical and academic worlds is easy or in some way not desirable. Instead we urge sport coaching researchers to more critically examine the role that we play in this process beyond the pursuit of performance metrics, self-interests, or profitable gains.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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