Cognitive Apprenticeship as a Pathway to Building Capacity in Not-for-Profit Committees

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Abstract

This article presents a specific problem in regard to building the governance and managerial capacity of volunteers within not-for-profit clubs. Developing "fit for purpose" training and development to meet the needs of volunteers is an on-going challenge for educators and volunteer club support organisations particularly within a context of resource constraints and a dynamic environment. Given the governance and managerial expectations of volunteer committees there exists a need to improve the capacity of such committees in order to enable "sustained effectiveness" in terms of financial and human capital within the clubs. Within this context, social learning methods have a long history in providing frameworks to help novices become experts, which is congruent with the preferred methods of skill building for these volunteers. Cognitive apprenticeship in educational practice is well founded in social learning methods and can become the "scaffold" by which building and sustaining capacity for these volunteers can be achieved. The solution involves using a model of training and development that incorporates scaffolding and mentoring as instructional strategies with coaching being used to integrate the elements.

Key Words: capacity building, mentoring, cognitive apprenticeship

Introduction

Despite an increasing investment in sport from governmental agencies (territorial and national) within New Zealand there is a lack of research into the capacity of clubs to deal with the requirements of an increasingly professional world. Moreover, there is even less of an understanding of how best to achieve a sustained increase in the capacity of not-for-profit sport club committees who play an integral role in facilitating the operations of clubs. The challenge for adult educators and volunteer training organisations is how to provide training and development that is accessible and effective for these individuals.

Not-for-profit sports clubs form a large part of the volunteer landscape within New Zealand. According to Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) (2011), there are more than 15,000 sport and recreation clubs in New Zealand. These are supported by over three-quarters of a million (776,000) volunteers. This equates to 25.3% of the adult population being involved as sport and recreation volunteers (although some of this number are likely to be active in more than one club). The report also suggests that "volunteers contributed over 50 million (51.3 million) hours to sport and recreation in 2007/08 and the estimated market value of these volunteered services is over $700 million" (SPARC, 2011, p. 5). Given these statistics and the clear community investment in both time and resources, it becomes readily apparent that there is a need for an appropriate process to provide the requisite skills to those who

make up a large and important part of the 'informal economy'.

Many of these volunteers, who begin volunteering to support family members are suddenly required to have an understanding of administration practice, accounting, funding applications, meeting procedures, and communication which are the staple skill sets needed for these clubs. The need for capacity development is clearly recognised by SPARC who invest substantial funds in supporting *grass roots* sports clubs – up to $70 million each year with the provision of financial assistance to support organisations as well as funding research and the development of resources (SPARC, 2009, p. 13). In particular, SPARC also provide seminars and other online tools to support capacity building for sports club committees. The efficacy of these tools, given the amounts invested, is not necessarily optimal thereby giving rise to considerations of how such capacity building initiatives may be improved and built upon in order to ensure the highest return on investment.

A lucid example of the issues surrounding building capacity for New Zealand not-for-profit clubs is the outcome of research commissioned by Manukau City Council on the "Future of Sport in Manukau City" (one of the largest cities in New Zealand at that time). This research indicated that 80% of clubs within the region struggled to fill positions on their committees and 65% reported they sometimes had people without the necessary skills and knowledge filling positions (Longdill and Associates, 2005). The outcomes of the 2005 research are supported by the findings of the research conducted for this article that it indicates that 46% of clubs struggle to fill positions on their committees and 51% indicated that their club is not well resourced financially. Given such a situation there is an evident need for some

form of sustained and effective capacity building process in order to provide the cornerstone for the recruitment and development of human capital associated with these clubs combined with associated initiatives to enhance their structural and financial viability.

Capacity

In order to further investigate the concept of capacity within this particular context it is important to determine what exactly is actually meant when referring to 'not-for-profit clubs' such as those exemplified by sports clubs and the like. Smith (as cited in Sharpe, 2006) defines grassroots associations as "volunteer-led, and informally structured organisations that operate at the level of the local community" (p. 385). In contrast Cuskelly and Boag state that "the committees of sport organisations are formal groups entrusted with the responsibility of acting on behalf of the members of that organisation" (2001, p. 72). Many of these organisations are by virtue of their role and function small, yet often loosely affiliated with, but relatively autonomous from, larger organisations. Consequently, the challenge for these clubs is their dependency on the ability to self sustain when they often hold very little power in their external environment and are on occasion susceptible to internal struggles around resourcing – both human and financial (Blackshaw & Long, 2005; Sharpe, 2006).

Organisations that wish to survive and thrive in the contemporary environment are faced with capacity challenges on an ongoing basis and must have a clear *raison d'être* in order to provide a clear focus for their operations. According to Hall et al. (2003) the capacity of an organisation to work toward a particular objective depends upon the capital it is able to deploy, residing predominantly within the spheres of

financial, human resources and structural capacity. "**Financial Capacity** – the ability to develop and deploy financial capital (i.e. the revenues, expenses, assets, and liabilities of the organization); **Human Resources Capacity** – the ability to deploy human capital (i.e. paid staff and volunteers) within the organization, and the competencies, knowledge, attitudes, motivation, and behaviours of these people. Human capital is considered to be the key element that leads to the development of all other capacities; **Structural Capacity** – the ability to deploy the non-financial capital that remains when the people from an organisation have gone home" (p. 5). Considering Hall's typology, it is clear that an argument can be made for the primary focus residing with the development of human resource capacity given that such development can be used as a springboard from which to develop both financial and structural capacity.

Having such a clear focus, would also ameliorate the risk associated with the *haphazard* nature of capacity building within not-for-profit organisations as mentioned by Boris (2001) who although mindful of the fact that "capacity building for non-profit organizations is finally drawing the attention it deserves" (p. 85), there is nevertheless a need to "sift" through the body of experience to identify the enduring lessons as well as take a "more broad and integrated approach to non-profit capacity building, [so that] a more coordinated and effective response can be developed" (p. 91).

Framework for practice

Dennen (2003) links scaffolding, modelling, mentoring and coaching within the context of cognitive apprenticeship which in simple terms relates to the study of the process of 'hands on' learning and knowledge sharing between two or more persons usually by means of a mentor – mentee/s relationship that can manifest itself in both informal and formal means. The process itself is one that has been part and parcel of human development since time immemorial and has proven itself as being one that is both suitable and appropriate in a number of circumstances especially those where transfer of specific knowledge and shills are required. Relating to this is scaffolding that comprises two main processes – the first is providing support by a *more knowledgeable other* (MKO) and the second involves gradual removal of the support system. Rogoff (1990) introduces the concept of scaffolding being an adult structure of child's learning activities akin to that which occurs in the parent child relationship. Central to scaffolding is what Vygotsky (1978) defined as the Zone of Proximal Development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). He suggested that learning activities should provide adequate challenges to the learner based on his or her current knowledge state but at the same time not be so challenging as to be unattainable. In addition, Wertsch (as cited in Rowlands, 2000) suggests that development of change is in the *process* capability which is more important than the end-product produced, bringing to mind the oft used adage of teaching someone to fish being of greater long term consequence and use than just providing them with fish. By understanding and learning the *process* it becomes embedded in the capability – this process can be learned through scaffolding knowledge. Scaffolding in adult education practice is explained by Dennan (2003) as "a learner-centred strategy whose success is dependent on its adaptability to the learners

needs" (p. 815). This is particularly important as there is no 'one size fits all approach' and, in practice, care needs to be taken to find the right balance between the myriad variables that impact upon a particular teaching/mentoring-learning relationship. Consequently, there is a need to provide support within a specific learning context, addressing student learning of concepts, procedures, strategies, and metacognitive skills (McLoughlin, 2002).

It is suggested that support by a MKO need not be a teacher, but a mentor where the mentor helps the protégé achieve longer term, broader goals. Furthermore the mentor does not necessarily carry the formal authority of a supervisor or teacher (Jacobi, 1991). Zachary (2005) suggests that a *learning partnership* should be established that is congruent with the learner centred mentoring paradigm, which is a shift from the mentor-driven paradigm; the mentor has become more of a facilitator or a guide *on the side* rather than a *teacher of the student*. The concept of a guide or mediator of knowledge provides a link to the development of process rather than the production of an end-product – much like the link between outputs and outcomes. Dennen and Burner (2004) introduce integrative teaching as a mentor strategy whereby the "mentor combines theory and practice in their explanation to the mentee" and that mentor's stories and experiences "made the learning more concrete and authentic" (p. 431). Cognitive modelling is effective when it is an explicit and active process of expert observation, reflection, and practice rather than a passive model of learning thereby making it congruent with the concept of mentoring and coaching (Dennen, 2003)

Coaching, mentoring, modelling and scaffolding can be deemed as being critical components of the cognitive apprenticeship model, with coaching itself being seen as the integral thread running through the entire apprenticeship experience (Brill, Kim, and Galloway, 2001; Collins, Brown and Holum, 1991). The adult learning approach to coaching is used to stimulate deep learning. It draws from a range of adult-learning theories, such as andragogy reflective practice and experiential learning which collectively argue that adults learn by reflecting on experiences (Ives, 2008). Gray (as cited in Ives 2008) advocates a transformative learning coaching model that seeks to raise the coachee's critical reflection to question assumptions. He suggests that coaching has become a tool in the increasing shift towards informal, self-directed learning in organisations. Parsloe and Wray (2000) distinguish coaching and mentoring by indicating that a mentor provides support of a generic nature and a coach is typically focussed on assisting to meet a particular goal. Mentoring is seen as a longer term relationship than coaching. This view is perhaps more clearly illustrated within a sports context where a 'coach' may be focussed on getting results for a particular season or event that has an end goal or envisaged outcome in sight whereas the role of mentoring is likely to be longer term and developmental, looking at future potential outcomes for a particular individual (although a coach can potentially also play the role of being a mentor to a particular individual this role is likely to be more appropriately filled by someone else).

Within the context of the volunteer committee sector, the pathway to building capacity is therefore, as previously mentioned, not one size fits all and may well be a paradigm shift in building capacity in the volunteer sector. In summarising cognitive apprenticeship research, Dennan and Burner (2004) suggest that empirical studies have confirmed much of what theories have suggested:

That the cognitive apprenticeship model is an accurate description of how learning occurs naturally as part of everyday life and social interaction, and (2) that the instructional strategies that have been extracted from these observation of everyday life can be designed into more formal learning context with positive effect. (p. 436)

Although mentoring and coaching should continue on an ongoing basis, it is essential that communities of practice be developed for purposes of achieving an appropriate level of sustained capacity in order to provide a core network of support that is self-sustaining. Dennen and Burner, (2004) define community of practice as "a group of people bound by participation in an activity common to them all" (p. 426). Relating to this is the view of Samarawickrema, Benson and Brack (2009) who assert that peer learning and online communities are effective for professional development. This implies that "peer learning and online communities" become 'communities of practice' in their own right. Similarly, Sturko and Gregson (2009) also found that peers' reflection, collaboration and sharing improves practice and fosters professional growth.

Accordingly, supporting professional learning through communities of practice is not new. However, within the context of volunteers and not-for-profit club committees it is not apparent or formally supported. The question therefore arises as to the most appropriate approach for bringing about outcomes such as those envisaged in the preceding paragraphs and which this research study seeks to identify and explain.

Method

This study used a mixed method design. Firstly a survey method (questionnaire) was used to establish views of a group and secondly a focus group was included to follow the questionnaires as they are ideal for exploring people's experience, opinions and concerns (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). Prior to commencing this research project approval was granted by the Manukau Institute of Technology Ethics Committee.

The survey collected data from committee members responsible for the administration of more than 100 different grass-roots sports organisations representing over 20 sporting codes within the Counties Manukau Region. The sampling frame was drawn from the Counties Manukau Sports (CMS) database of sports clubs, which included 519 grass roots sports clubs. Four hundred and twenty six club participants were invited by email to complete an online questionnaire using Survey Monkey. Two email reminders were sent to all participants to encourage a higher response rate. There were 157 respondents (36.17%) to the survey. Thirty-one respondents did not complete all the sections leaving a minimum usable sample of 126 (29.03%) responses. The participants are volunteer sports administrators defined as individuals who were formally elected or appointed to an honorary position on the committee responsible for the administration of a not-for-profit 'grassroots' sports organisation or association. This excludes coaches and managers of sports teams. It does include but is not limited to roles such as club president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, club convenors and coordinator roles such as grants, communication and others.

The sample group for the focus group was drawn from a stratified random sample comprising of one committee

member from each of the 66 sporting codes/activities represented in the CMS database. The focus group was small comprising three participants from different sports clubs. NVivo software was used to undertake a qualitative analysis of the focus group feedback. NVivo recognises that qualitative research is varied, and that different qualitative methodologies have very different goals. The nodes system was used, which is the container for themes or categories and coding into a hierarchy - called tree nodes (Richards, as cited in Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2000). The three nodes used were: challenges, strengths and support agencies.

The sample group for the focus group was drawn from a stratified random sample comprising of one committee member from each of the 66 sporting codes/activities represented in the CMS database. The focus group met for two hours and comprised of three participants each having experience volunteering for more than one club and having a range of experience from 5 to 20 years. The focus group process followed the seven step structure proposed by Maylor and Blackmon, 2005 with a combination of pre-structured and discussion lead questions focussing on volunteer challenges, strengthening their organisation, reasons for continuing to volunteer and committee functioning.

The transcription of the focus group recordings was carried out independently and was analysed using NVivo software to undertake qualitative analysis of the focus group feedback. NVivo recognises that qualitative research is varied, and that different qualitative methodologies have very different goals. Open coding was used to highlight key ideas that emerged in the

data (Jones, 2006; Maylor & Blackmon, 2005). The final stage of coding involved selective coding whereby a storyline was developed to capture the essence of what was happening in the study (Jones, 2006). The nodes system was used, which is the container for themes or categories and coding into a hierarchy (Richards, as cited in Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2000). The three nodes used to draw together the qualitative data from the online surveys and the focus groups were: challenges, strengths and support agencies.

Survey Data

The respondents represented clubs which varied in size from less than 20 members (2% of responses) to clubs with more than 200 members (40% of responses). 82.1% of respondents held direct roles (President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, General Committee) within their committee. There was a broad range of committee experience (22% were committee members for less than 2 years; 43% between 3 to 6 years; and 35% greater than 7 years).

The first series of questions related to the access of committee members to training, which are presented in Table 1. Respondents were asked to select the nature of training opportunities available to them. Just over 61% were not aware of, or thought that training was not available for them. Only half of the 38.8% of volunteers that were aware of training being available actually accessed that training showing a large gap between awareness and action. This indicates both a structural and motivational challenge and opportunity for future development initiatives and also serves as a 'red flag' where appropriate intervention may lead to successful outcomes.

Table 1: Training opportunities

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Available and accessed by me	25	19.8
Available and NOT accessed by me	24	19.1
Not available to me	8	6.3
I don't know about any training opportunities	69	54.8
Total	126	100.0

The next series of questions used a Seven Point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree 4 = Neutral; 7 = strongly agree) to assess the support provided by various named support agencies. Results are presented in Table 2. The clubs' regional governing bodies appeared to provide the best support (just under 4), but most respondents felt that they received less support (less than the neutral score of 4) from the identified bodies than they expected. Local councils scored lowest despite the fact that many resources (fields, facilities and developmental funding) comes directly from council.

Table 2: Assessment of support provided by various named support agencies.

	Mean	Std Deviation
Our clubs National Governing Body provides me with the support I need to make my job as a volunteer easier.	3.4762	1.6527
Our clubs Regional Governing Body provides me with the support I need to make my job as a volunteer easier.	3.9677	1.75275
Our clubs Local Council or its representatives provide me with the support I need to make my job as a volunteer easier.	3.6	1.93441
Sports Development Officers provide me with the support I need to make my job as a volunteer easier.	3.736	1.77865

The final group of questions provided a range of alternative methods of skills training and development and asked respondents to select those which they felt would be most appropriate. More than one choice was allowed, but ranking was not required. Results are presented in Table 3. Mentoring and networking were clearly the preferred methods for skills training and development and can be related to the adult education nature of skills development requirements for this particular volunteer group. Formalised training opportunities (Workshops, particularly the longer ones) scored quite low, perhaps reflecting the time conflicts felt by many of the volunteers interviewed for whom volunteering was in addition to their other responsibilities and commitments of a professional, work or family nature.

Table 3: Preferred training and development methods – participants could choose more than one.

	Percent of choices	Percent of cases
Options[a]		
Group Workshop 1 day - your clubrooms	2.70%	6.30%
Group Workshop 1 day - specified venue	3.00%	7.10%
Group Workshop 1 - 4 hours - your clubrooms	7.00%	16.70%
Networking (With other volunteers - general)	13.00%	31.00%
Group Workshop 1 - 4 hours - specified venue	14.00%	33.30%
One to one coaching by experienced volunteers	14.00%	33.30%
Networking (With other volunteers with similar role)	19.00%	45.20%
Mentoring	25.70%	61.10%
Other	1.70%	4.00%
Total	100.00%	238.10%

Discussion

The investment in supporting sports clubs within New Zealand is substantial with the guiding organisation now being Sport New Zealand (formally SPARC). Sport and recreation development organisations within New Zealand offer online and face to face support to sports club committees and are continually facing the challenges in building governance and managerial capacity in sports clubs. This is acknowledged by the inclusion of club committees in two of the five priority areas targeted by SPARC (2009). In particular, developing capacity within these clubs is clearly acknowledged as a priority although the manner of doing so indicates a potential gap between priority and actual outcomes that requires closer attention to the manner in which capacity development initiatives are planned and implemented. Although, the volunteer feedback indicates that this area has drawn attention it is not yet the case that *all is well*. Volunteers are not engaging in training to the level that would provide confidence that capacity building is enduring. The majority (more than 80%) of volunteers did not engage in training for their volunteer roles.

It is therefore evident that further attention needs to be given to developing and providing suitable capacity related mechanisms that allow volunteer organisations to undertake, on an ongoing basis, a gap analysis of their volunteers measured against their particular governance and managerial requirements. Such mechanisms may be provided in a potentially formal and central 'template' structure e.g. via online means, with a relatively informal means of implementation. Given the diversity surrounding skill requirements for volunteer organisations and their respective volunteers it would be necessary to ensure that any such developments or initiatives be highly flexible and adaptable to ensure that 'form follows function'.

Also, the ambivalence towards the level of support offered by governing bodies and sports development officers needs to be addressed. Clubs' governing bodies appear to provide the best support (slightly less than the midpoint of the scale) but most

respondents felt that the support provided by the agencies was less than the *neutral* point. There is certainly commitment to build capacity in the sports clubs and there are an abundance of resources provided both financially and physically - but, it may be a case of overload in some areas and under load in others indicating a breakdown in the mechanisms used to evaluate and allocate appropriate resources that are fit for purpose. Comments from focus group members provided some insights into the link between the support agencies and the sports club committees:

> *[Support agencies] concentrate on coaching the player type roles and so there's very little, pretty much no support given to actual like secretary, treasurer and that.*

> *But it's more sort of like around the coaching and things like that, not so much committee roles or committee members*

> *It's mainly just for the coaching, just the coaching and pretty much the game officials as opposed to the committee members*

> *Probably if anything would be really good would be for the president or chairperson if they had training for that person.*

Such comments are indicative of an approach that is somewhat simplistic insofar it favours the 'explicit' outcome (e.g. sports team capability) without due attention being given to the critical but less glamorous logistics and support functions that reside in the background or 'beneath the surface'.

As indicated by Petriwskyj and Warburton (2007) "volunteering is generally treated as one normalised category of activity, without recognition of the wide variety of activities that could potentially comprise volunteering" (p.7). Support agencies dealing with sports clubs across various sporting codes; administration requirements; levels of sporting achievement and socio-economic conditions makes it difficult to tease out the unique needs and requirements of clubs and their committees.

Essentially, findings indicate that the nature of *fit for purpose* training and development in this not-for-profit sector still gives a sense of the *haphazard*. Just over 61% of respondents were not aware of, or thought that training was not available for them with only 38.8% of them who were aware of training actually accessing it. Notwithstanding the lack of awareness, there are additional challenges for committee members that impact on their ability to access training. Consequently, planning and scheduling the right development mix to reach sustainable capacity is important as it must consider these other challenges and demands facing such volunteers. Some focus group comments regarding challenges were:

> *To actually get quality people to volunteer is really hard. As soon as you say 'Hey, well why don't you get involved' 'Oh no – I'm too busy'*

> *Ours is probably is getting new people to come on the committee. Usually you get someone in and you throw them in the deep end. And that's scary for people.*

> *In reality you know like we have a reasonable large committee but in fact most you know like 80% of the work is done by three people*

[Meetings] Boy you can really quickly just end up talking about a load of rubbish.

The focus group members did provide some insight into what they perceived as success for their committees. It tended to be wrapped around the experience of other individuals and the implementation of a structured approach to the committee functioning. This reinforces the view of the role that can be played using experiential processes related to cognitive apprenticeships such as mentoring and coaching. Indicative comments included:

We used to ramble and were there all night, and achieved nothing you know, it was just... And then when [name] comes on, the new chairman, he just said 'right if it's not on the agenda we're not discussing it.

When I first joined the committee we had no structure and I think it was like kind of free for all, but probably within the last three years we've run to an agenda, we've got the year planned even on the off season.

There is an apparent need to follow the advice provided in the surveys that indicates support for including a broader and integrated approach to capacity building in this particular sector. The notion of a *cognitive apprenticeship* whereby not-for-profit volunteers are coached and mentored within their *authentic* environment represents both a challenge and an opportunity for organisations that support the clubs. Mentoring and coaching are recommended as being the preferred training methods for volunteers in this particular environment and also dovetails within the framework of cognitive apprenticeship that is contingent upon using an appropriate

blend of tools to build capacity. Consequently, it is deemed appropriate that workshops (both face to face and online) should also be weaved into the scaffold to meet the contemporary needs of capacity building.

Although this survey did not specifically target online training – it should be noted that many of the resources provided by the support agencies were online templates, case studies, checklists and publications rather than training resources *per se.* Further research to establish the level of engagement with online resources would enrich the findings of this research and provide the basis for a 'stock take' of what support is currently available to bridge the real gap that exists between perceived needs and real needs of volunteers and their respective organisations.

There is currently little or no research into the concept of embedding cognitive apprenticeship theory and practice into the not-for-profit and volunteer sector to develop sustained governance and managerial capacity building. Therefore, there is a requirement for initiatives that can bring about a paradigm shift to align development of financial, human and structural capital through the lens of social learning practices. This would include, among others greater emphasis on the sustainable and efficient delivery of appropriate mentoring, modelling, coaching, cognitive apprenticeship and communities of practice that would fit well with the nature of the volunteer sector and could provide the requisite 'fit for purpose' context support agencies and educators could embrace.

It is not so much the lack of resources or opportunities that hinder capacity building in this sector. Dedicated and concerted effort is required to establish greater awareness and recognition of the nature and impact of the problem, followed by a coordinated response directed at its

resolution. Although, not directly quantifiable, capacity building initiatives directed at volunteers and their organisations will have larger positive consequences for society as a whole. Not only will such initiatives contribute to an increased sense of well being and achievement at the cultural and societal levels but it would have the added benefit of contributing towards the building of similar capacity in both public and private spheres of activity where individuals find themselves outside of their volunteer role.

Resolving the challenges posed in this article need not be an onerous or overly complicated undertaking. Rather, the recommended path forward relies heavily on tried and tested approaches that have been followed in one form or another for millennia. The key resides with the capacity of individuals to recognise and champion the use of such methods irrespective of the level at which they find themselves in relation to their governance and managerial responsibilities. The way of achieving this is through a concerted and systematic approach that recognises knowledge sharing and associated processes such as cognitive apprenticeship as being crucial components of both individual and organisational development from strategic policy level all the way through to grassroots implementation.

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