


## SPORTS COACHES' LEARNING AS A SOCIAL PARTICIPATION PROCESS: A PERSPECTIVE FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

*APRENDIZAGEM DO TREINADOR ESPORTIVO COMO UM PROCESSO DE PARTICIPAÇÃO SOCIAL: UMA PERSPECTIVA À PESQUISA CIENTÍFICA* 

*EL APRENDIZAJE DEL ENTRENADOR DEPORTIVO COMO UN PROCESO DE PARTICIPACIÓN SOCIAL: UNA PERSPECTIVA PARA LA INVESTIGACIÓN CIENTÍFICA* 

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**Abstract:** The objective of this theoretical essay was to introduce the Social Theory of Learning (STL) and to indicate how its adjacent conceptual framework has been used in investigations into sports coaches' learning and development. STL provides a broad analytical and instrumental scope with potential for understanding and promoting coaches' learning. The thematic directions emerging in the investigative agenda in this field reflect the breadth of the conceptual framework that forms STL. The contributions from these studies meet the demand to use theoretical matrices that preserve the complexity, social nature and contextual character of coaches' learning.

**Keywords:** Learning. Physical Education and Training. Sports. Social Theory.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The process involving coaches' professional learning is acknowledged as a central element in the search for quality pedagogical interventions in sports (GILBERT; TRUDEL, 2004). Experiences as athlete and as coach, social interactions, and informal mentoring are especially valued in coaches' learning (BRAZIL *et al.*, 2015; WALKER; THOMAS; DRISKA, 2018). Additionally, criticism of the effectiveness of coaches' training programs (MALLET *et al.*, 2009), the advent of information and communication technologies (CUSHION; TOWNSEND, 2019), and the need to understand the influence of coaches' experiences on their professional interventions (CALLARY; WERTHNER; TRUDEL, 2013) are demands that evoke renewed levels of scientific research in this field.

The recognition of informal learning has fostered a perspective that considers the social and contextualized nature of learning (ARMOUR, 2010), directing the focus of analysis to the specific way in which coaches participate/participated and interact/interacted with different individuals in certain practices and social contexts (TRUDEL; GILBERT, 2006). Such findings indicate the relevance of a learning perspective in which the relationship between coaches and the social contexts in which they participate define the construction of their knowledge for pedagogical intervention. This encompasses a continuous and successive process of engagement in social practices, of changes in terms of competencies and skills that are useful to the profession, of incorporating values (beliefs), as well as the development of personal perspectives of life and of one's own performance as a coach (CUSHION; TOWNSEND, 2016; MALLET, 2010).

This understanding reveals a socio-constructivist perspective of coaches' learning (CASSIDY; ROSSI, 2006; MALLET, 2010), which has been interpreted through the Social Theory of Learning (STL) and the concept of Community of Practice (CoP), proposed by Wenger (1998). A CoP comprises a simple "social learning space", constituting a "landscape of practice" that is interrelated to other various types of social learning spaces (networks, discussions, and work teams) (WENGER-TRAYNER; WENGER-TRAYNER, 2018).

These concepts integrate a broad theoretical framework in which learning is conceived as a type of "journey" taken by an individual in a "social landscape" consisting of various interconnected social practices, resulting in the development of: competencies for participation in different contexts of that landscape; a trajectory of identity, interests, values, personal and professional perspectives; and future aspirations of participation (WENGER, 2010). Thus, learning is expressed and consolidated in the very form of an individual's participation in this "social landscape", encompassing his/her level of engagement in different social practices, the level of competence achieved in relation to such practices and in his/her ability to move across different contexts and social practices (WENGER-TRAYNER *et al.*, 2015).

A number of research showed that sport systems consist of different CoPs (CULVER; TRUDEL, 2008; GALIPEAU; TRUDEL, 2006) and that coaches' competencies and identity result from their trajectory of participation in different CoPs

throughout their lives (BRASIL, 2019; BRASIL *et al.*, 2018; DUARTE; CULVER; PAQUETE, 2020). Research of an instrumental perspective reveals the effectiveness of CoP development among coaches of the same team or club and the importance of a facilitator to “nurture” coaches’ engagement in CoP activities (CALLARY, 2013; CULVER; TRUDEL, 2006; CULVER; TRUDEL; WERTHNER, 2009). Moreover, the promotion of social interactions among coaches enhances learning through the reflection process (STOSZKOWSKI; COLLINS, 2014; KUKLICK *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the emphasis on social participation grants STL a relevant potential for coaches’ learning analysis (CULVER; KRAFT, 2017).

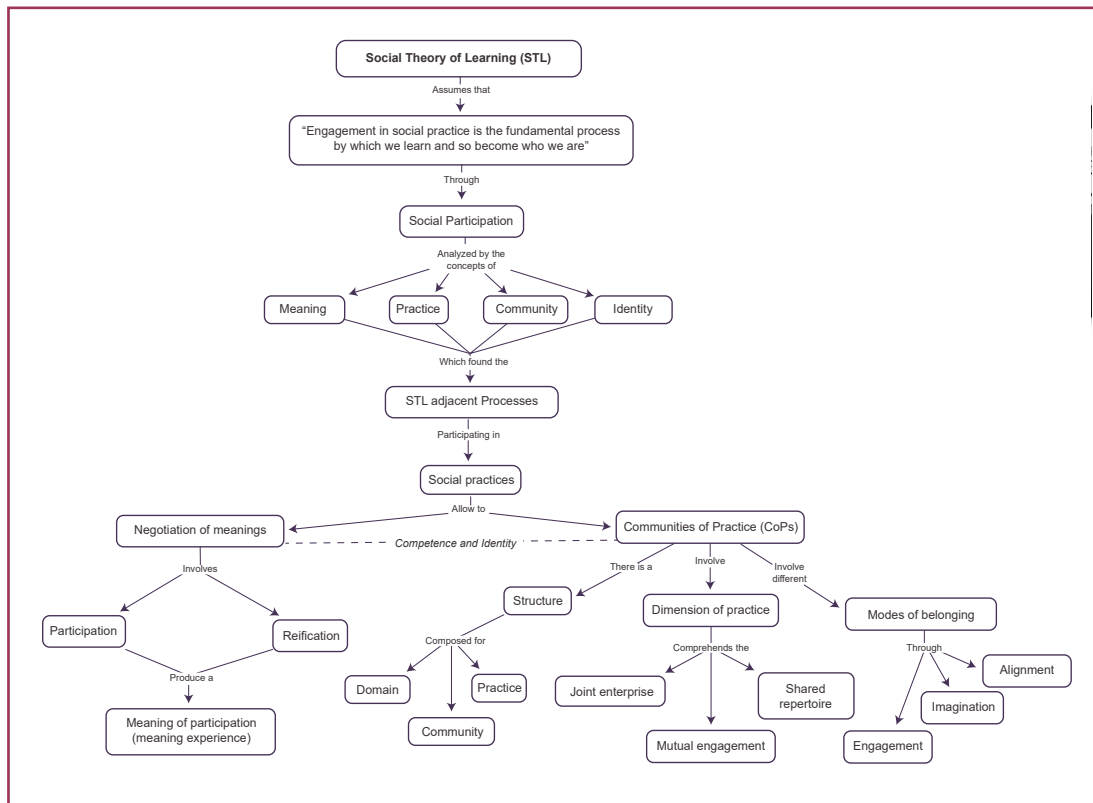
Thus, this theoretical essay aims to present the Social Theory of Learning (STL) (WENGER, 1998) and show how its adjacent conceptual framework has been used in research on sport coaches’ learning and development, contributing to the development of investigative possibilities and scientific conversation in the field. To this end, we will present: a) the assumptions, conceptual components and adjacent processes of STL; b) the implications of STL in research focused on sport coaches’ learning and development; and finally, c) the perspectives and challenges for scientific research in the field.

## 2 THE SOCIAL THEORY OF LEARNING (STL)

The Social Theory of Learning (STL) (WENGER, 1998) was developed from the notion of apprenticeship and the formulation of the concepts of Situated Learning and Communities of Practice (CoPs) proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). Under the influence of a socio-constructivist perspective of learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) elucidated the relational process between the person and the world, proposing that, when interacting, individuals move from a peripheral to a more central participation in the practices of a CoP, characterizing what they have called as Legitimate Peripheral Participation. In STL, the notion of a CoP is a central concept in which, according to Wenger (1998, Foreword), “The primary unit of analysis is neither the individual nor social institutions but rather the informal “communities of practice’ that people form [...]”.

Figure 1 shows an itinerary of the structuring concepts of STL addressed in this theoretical essay. From this perspective, learning as a process of social participation is systematized and analyzed through the concepts of *meaning*, *practice*, *community*, and *identity*. Thus, the integration of these concepts allows for a theoretical perspective about learning that occurs through individuals’ participation in social practices. Specifically, the processes of “*negotiation of meaning*” (participation and reification) and belonging to “*communities of practice*” (CoPs) (structure, dimensions of practice and modes of belonging) are presented, as well as their implications in terms of competencies and identity.

**Figure 1** - Conceptual map of the STL concepts presented in this theoretical essay.



Source: The authors (2020).

## 2.1 STL ASSUMPTIONS AND COMPONENTS

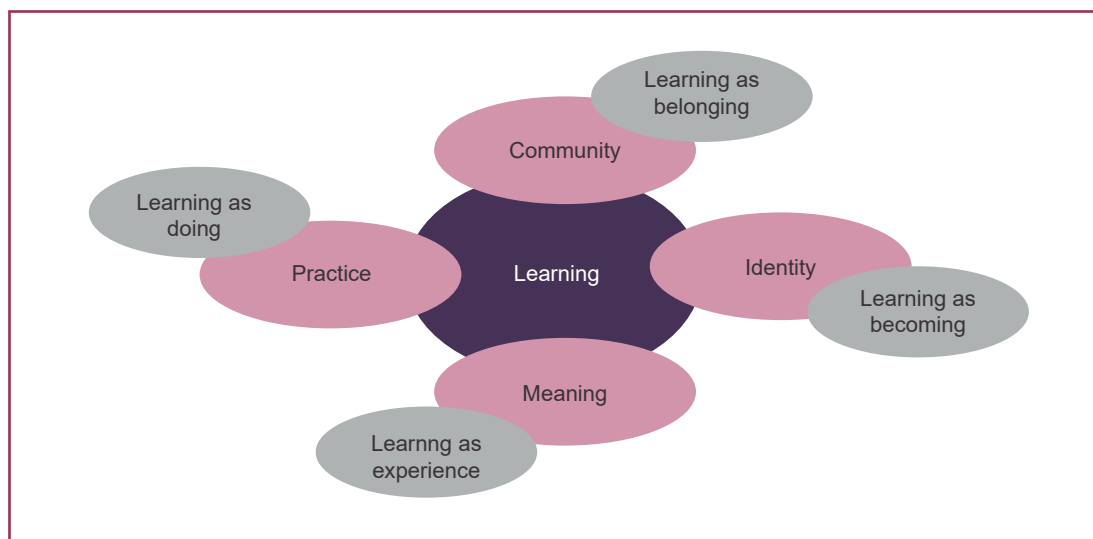
The fundamental assumption of the STL, according to Wenger (1998, Foreword), is that: “Engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are”. The analytical focus of STL is on learning as a process of social participation, which refers:

[...] not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. (WENGER, 1998, p. 4).

The social groups or structures that people form, the relationships they establish, and the activities that are developed within these groups define what the individual does (actions), who he/she is, and how he/she interprets what he/she does.

The theoretical assumptions on learning are synthesized in four principles: (a) we are social beings, and far from being a trivial truth, this fact is a central aspect of learning; (b) knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to initiatives/enterprises that are valued; (c) knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such initiatives/enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world (it occurs in the context of specific social practices); (d) meaning is our ability to experience the world and our engagement as meaningful (WENGER, 1998). As a result, meaning, practice, community, and identity correspond to the conceptual components used to characterize and analyze learning as a process of social participation (FIGURE 2).

Figure 2 - Conceptual components of a STL.



Source: Wenger (1998, p. 5).

Meaning refers to the possibility of analyzing individual and collective capacity to change in order to experience life and the world in a meaningful way. Practice is the component that allows for the analysis of the ways in which individuals share historical and social resources, as well as the perspectives that sustain their mutual engagement in a particular action or activity. The Community is the social settings in which individuals' initiatives (projects or activities) are considered appropriate and in which their participation is recognized as competent. The Identity, in turn, allows for the analysis of the processes by which learning modifies individuals and creates particular trajectories of transformation, in the context of communities (WENGER, 1998).

Although Learning has a central position in the proposed theoretical construct, when replaced by the position of any of the other components the figure maintains its meaning because the components are interconnected and define each other. The interrelational character of this conceptual framework reflects the perspective of learning that occurs in the context of the individual's daily experience of participation in the world, in which the agent (person who acts), the activity (the practice) and the environment are elements that constitute each other in a reciprocal manner (WENGER, 1998). This perspective, therefore, allows us to consider learning from the individual's social relations in the different contexts in which he or she participates, as well as the learning that occurs in a particular type of community (Community of Practice) that people form when they engage together in a social practice.

## 2.2 ADJACENT PROCESSES TO STL

An individual's participation in typical social practices promotes the emergence of meaning negotiation and CoP formation. The concept of practice suggests "doing" as an action in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what the individual does (WENGER, 1998). This includes what is explicit, spoken and represented (language, tools, documents, images, symbols, defined roles) and also what is implicit, understood and just assumed by individuals (implicit relationships, specific perceptions,

embedded understanding and shared worldviews). Although different initiatives (activities and actions) attribute different characteristics to social practices, they involve the same character of participation (incorporated, active, social, negotiated and complex) in which acting and knowing are simultaneous and inseparable (WENGER, 2010).

### 2.2.1 Negotiating meanings through engagement in social practices

The focus on meaning in STL defines it as an experience of everyday life, “located” in a process that Wenger (1998) refers to as “negotiation of meaning”. The term negotiation expresses the continuing nature of the process in which we produce a new experience of meaning to what we do and say, even if it is related to something we have already done and said in the past. Through daily activities “[...] we produce meanings that extend, redirect, dismiss, reinterpret, modify, or confirm the stories of meaning of which they are a part” (WENGER, 1998, p. 52). The negotiation of meaning processes is formed by the interaction between two other processes: participation and reification.

The concept participation designates an initiative/activity in which meaning is established through shared relationships and identities, involving taking part in actions, establishing relationships, the desire to belong in the community, the mutual understanding achieved, the way of sharing stories and social resources that support a mutual engagement in practice. Reification consists in converting experiences into “things” (material or concrete object). Wenger (1998, p. 59) explains that: “The abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms and concepts that reify (“thingify”) something of that practice in a congealed form”. This encompasses mechanisms such as “doing, representing, naming, coding, perceiving, interpreting, using, and reframing”.

The duality between these two processes precisely suggests that, in terms of meaning, persons and things cannot be defined independently of each other. Participation is clearly a social process; however, it still comprises a personal (individual) experience. Reification, on the other hand, allows the individual to coordinate his actions collectively and also directs his own perception of the world and himself. Thus, the meaning of participation in social practices is neither in the individual nor in the world, but in the dynamic and continuous relationship of living and taking part in the world (WENGER, 1998).

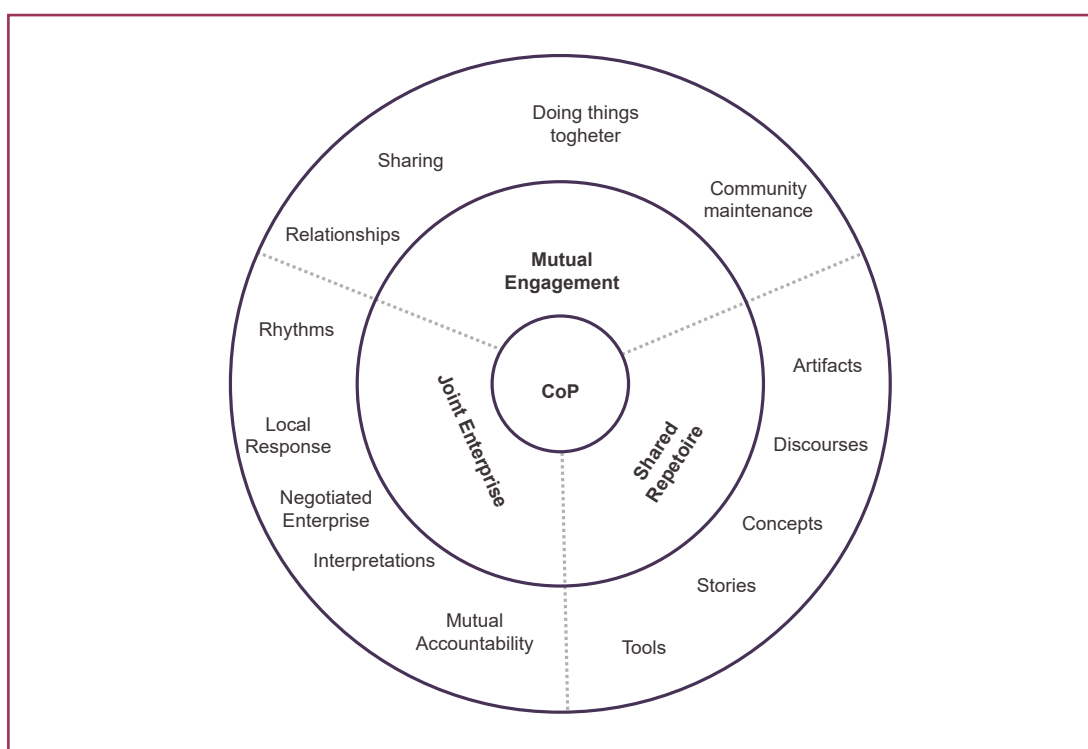
### 2.2.2 Communities of Practice (CoPs): the type of community that engagement in practice results in

In definition, a CoP comprises a “[...] groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, and who develop their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (WENGER; MCDERMOTT; SNYDER, 2002, p. 4). Thus, a CoP consists of a social structure resulting from the engagement of a group of people in shared social practices, constituting a “space” in which the negotiation of meanings related to such practices among CoP members is the essential way of learning and identity constitution (WENGER, 2010).

## 2.2.2.1 CoP: structure, dimensions of practice and modes of belonging

A CoP is structurally formed by the combination of three components: domain, community and practice (WENGER; MCDERMOTT; SNYDER, 2002). The domain indicates the delimitation of which topics or subjects are of interest to the CoP. It is the reason why people gather together, with implications for their commitment to the group and the definition of their identity and that of CoP itself. The community is the “space” in which interactions among members take place and which enables the creation of a trusting and challenging environment, favoring learning. Practice concerns the activities, ideas, tools, information, language, and stories that CoP members share (WENGER-TRAYNER; WENGER-TRAINER, 2018). The coherence and synchrony of a CoP's activities are underpinned by the relationship of three dimensions of practice: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and a shared repertoire (FIGURE 3).

**Figure 3** – Dimensions of practice as a property of a CoP.



Source: Wenger, 1998, p. 73.

Joint enterprise (initiative or activity) encompasses the responsibilities that CoP members assume together as a result of the trust established, similarity of interpretations made and responses constructed locally to CoP. Mutual engagement is the process by which CoP members take on different avenues to carry out initiatives together. The practice exists because people are mutually engaged in negotiating the meanings of shared actions. In turn, the shared repertoire refers to what is collectively produced and consolidated in CoP over time (tools, routines, language) (WENGER, 1998). Table 1 presents the indicators of the existence of a CoP and the corresponding dimensions of practice.

**Table 1** - Indicators that a CoP has formed.

Indicators	Dimensions of practice
1. Sustained mutual relationships - harmonious or conflictual	Mutual engagement
2. Shared ways of engaging in doing things together	Mutual Engagement Joint Enterprise
3. The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation.	Mutual engagement
4. Absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process.	Mutual engagement Shared repertoire
5. Very quick setup of a problem to be discussed	Mutual engagement Shared repertoire
6. Substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs to CoP	Mutual engagement
7. Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise.	Mutual Engagement Joint Enterprise Shared repertoire
8. Mutually defining identities.	Mutual engagement
9. The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products.	Shared repertoire
10. Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts.	Shared repertoire
11. Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter.	Shared repertoire
12. Jargon and shortcuts to communication, as well as the ease of producing new ones.	Shared repertoire Mutual engagement
13. Certain styles recognized as displaying membership.	Mutual engagement
14. Shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world.	Mutual engagement

Source: Wenger, 1998, p. 125.

Regarding an individual's participation in a CoP, Wenger (1998) considers three distinct forms of belonging in the CoP: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement refers to the individual's active involvement in the process of negotiating meaning, by sharing stories, and interacting with other members. Imagination comprises the process of creating images of the world and visualizing connections that go beyond the individual's own experience of local engagement. Alignment is a form of belonging in which activities shared by CoP (local enterprise) members are coordinated so as to make them part of broader social structures. Thus, most of what people do involves a combination of engagement, imagination, and alignment, with emphasis on one or the other attributing distinct qualities to the actions and their meanings.

#### 2.2.2.2 The concepts of competence and identity in STL

By mutually engaging in the CoP endeavors and negotiating the meanings of shared experiences, members define the CoP's regime of competence. For Wenger (2010), the regime of competence comprises a set of criteria and expectations, by which CoP members recognize each other as competent. Competence, therefore, does not just refer to the ability to perform certain actions or the mastery of certain skills. To be competent means to be able to engage with other members and to use the CoP's repertoire of resources appropriately (WENGER, 2010). Thus, the perspective is that competence is defined, created and validated in the very process of social participation in CoP.



Similarly, identity corresponds to an aspect that is “[...] inseparable from social practice, the community and the process of meaning negotiation, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other” (WENGER, 1998, p. 145). Even in the context of a specific social practice, an individual’s identities do not comprise only an individual process for that practice, but are also defined as a result of the individual’s position as a CoP member and their position within broader social structures. The individual’s practices, languages, and worldviews reflect his social relations, so that even in his most private thoughts he uses concepts, images, and perspectives that he has acquired through his participation in different CoPs (WENGER, 2010).

Considering identity in its social face implies recognizing that people are a reflection of ongoing participation in CoPs in which they have belonged and/or belong (WENGER, 2010). Identity goes beyond a single temporal trajectory of participation; it encompasses the integration (nexus) of affiliations (participations) to different CoPs, as well as the individual’s various modes of belonging (engagement, imagination, and alignment) in these CoPs. For Wenger (1998), multiple trajectories in different CoPs become part of each other through connections or the reconciliation of the individual’s experiences and forms of membership, transforming (resignifying) who he is and his stories.

### 2.3 DEVELOPMENT OF STL AND THE CONCEPT OF CoP

Based on Wenger’s (1998) initial proposal to theorize the concept of CoP for analyse learning, Wenger, Mcdermott and Snyder (2002) gave to the notion of CoP an instrumental perspective that provides a conceptual framework to guide CoP development. This initiative sought to meet the demand to foster the innovation of professional practices and the creative solution of problems that are typical of the workplace. To this process, the roles of leaders and/or facilitators in the development of CoPs were introduced.

The view that one CoP integrates a broader and more complex social systems (social learning systems), involving other CoPs and other social structures (teams, projects and institutions) (WENGER, 2010), had an impact on the expansion of the conceptual scope of STL in two directions. The first, in developing the “landscape of practice” metaphor, which proposes a conceptual tool to analyze multifiliation in different CoPs and the processes emerging from an individual’s trajectory of participation in multiple social structures (WENGER-TRAYNER *et al.*, 2015). The second, in delimiting a set of other types of social structures (discussions, workshops, networks, and teams), in addition to CoPs, through which people learn intentionally, which is called “social learning space”<sup>1</sup> (WENGER-TRAYNER; WENGER-TRAYNER, 2018).

In a recent phase, Wenger-Trayner *et al.* (2019) presented a revised version of the value creation framework, previously proposed by Wenger, Trayner, and De Laat (2011), which consists of a conceptual framework to promote and assess the value that CoP and networks can produce in their members. The value creation framework suggests the triangulation of different types (quantitative and qualitative)

<sup>1</sup> “A social learning space is similar to a CoP, but without the expectations of continuity and ongoing commitment. Some examples are: a group of people who share a need to explore a problem and gather to talk about it; a person has identified a problem they have in common with other people and has proposed videoconferences to find a solution.” (WENGER-TRAYNER; WENGER-TRAYNER, 2018, p. 43).

and data sources (records of access to websites, document downloads, and stories told by participants) to obtain empirical evidence on how and what values CoPs and networks can generate for each of their members, as well as for the organizations/entities (WENGER-TRAYNER; WENGER-TRAYNER, 2018).

### 3 STL AND CoP IN RESEARCH FOCUSED ON SPORTS COACHES' LEARNING

The recognized potential of STL and the concept of CoP have contributed to scientific research focused on professional development in fields such as information science, management, health and education (LI *et al.*, 2009). The studies conducted in those areas have boosted research in the field of sports coaching, especially by considering the informal and social nature of learning and by recognizing the relevance of social interactions in the construction of knowledge for coaching and in the constitution of coaches' identity (CULVER; TRUDEL, 2008).

Research on the life trajectories of artistic gymnastics coaches (BRASIL *et al.*, 2018) and surfing coaches (BRASIL, 2019) show that their experiences were shaped by the social relationships and practices in which they engaged, participating in different CoPs (family, club, school, athletes, etc.). The regime of competencies and the meanings developed in each CoP drove their engagement in social practices in other CoPs, attributing (re)new meanings to them and establishing a trajectory of identity. Although we recognize the limitation of retrospective studies to obtain details of coaches' experiences, STL and the concept of CoP are useful tools to analyze the process of being and becoming a coach, with possibilities to understand the process of constitution of coaches' beliefs, competencies and identity (CASSIDY; ROSSI, 2006).

In the context of sport systems, is recognized the existence of CoPs of athletes, coaches and managers (CULVER; TRUDEL, 2008). When investigating the interactions between athletes and coaches of the same ice hockey team, based on the concept of the social learning system, Galipeau and Trudel (2006) found the existence of two different CoPs (athletes and coaches). The delimitation of the undertakings of each CoP, as well as the relationships based on the transparency and "negotiability" between coaches and athletes, protected the interests of both CoPs, allowing each to assist in the improvement of the other's practice. In contrast, Lemyre, Trudel, and Durand-Bush (2007) found a lack of CoPs among coaches in the same sports league, as they did not interact regularly to share experiences or discuss common training problems; hence, these initiatives were restricted to their teams and clubs.

More recently, Duarte, Culver, and Paquette (2020) used the notion of "landscape of practice" to analyze the learning resources and barriers of wheelchair curling coaches affiliated with the Canadian wheelchair curling federation. The results showed that geographic isolation and high costs course for coaches were the main barriers to learning. The notion of the landscape of practice provided a broad view of the sports system in which the coaches were involved, and indicated strategies at different levels of this system to minimize the barriers identified, namely, establishing interactions with influential people defined at the coaches' own choice and using opportunities at training and competition "camps" to nurture personal interactions.

In fact, analytical research has the potential to identify the existence or not of CoPs, as well as to explore the “landscape of practice” of coaches in different sports contexts (teams, competitions, entities and modalities). The contributions from these studies include obtaining evidence about which aspects contribute to and/or hinder coaches' mutual engagement in shared endeavors, as well as providing preliminary information for experimental studies that seek to design, implement and sustain CoPs of coaches (DUARTE; CULVER; PAQUETTE, 2020).

Studies on the development of CoPs have prominently recurred in the investigative coaching agenda. Coaches' CoPs have been developed in baseball (CULVER; TRUDEL; WERTHNER, 2009; KUKLICK *et al.*, 2016), downhill skiing (CULVER; TRUDEL, 2006; GARNER; HILL, 2017), figure skating (CALLARY, 2013), soccer (GOMES, 2015), and with coaches in high school sports (BERTRAM; GILBERT, 2011). These studies show that local “one-to-one” interactions encourage the negotiation of meanings related to work tasks and coaches' interest in enhancing specific knowledge. In particular, group reflections have led coaches to develop emotional knowledge and to implement athlete-centered coaching approaches (GARNER; HILL, 2017; KUKLICK *et al.*, 2016).

Being part of the same sport organization or club does not guarantee the formation of CoPs among coaches (CULVER; TRUDEL, 2006). Because the competitive culture of sport (CULVER; TRUDEL; WERTHNER, 2009) and the power imbalance in social relationships in this context (GOMES *et al.*, 2013) may inhibit mutual engagement among coaches for the improvement of their perspectives of coaching. Some recommendations for the development of coaches' CoPs include: having a “facilitator” recognized by the sport organization, who is familiar with the CoP domain and able to “nurture” it (GILBERT; GALLIMORE; TRUDEL, 2009); considering coaches, manager, and the facilitator in structuring the CoP (BARNSON, 2010); encouraging ongoing collaboration and communication; promoting an environment in which coaches feel confident and open to learning (CALLARY, 2013); and also, the creation of local PoCs (teams and clubs) (KUKLICK *et al.*, 2016).

Research conducted in university settings show that the presence of a facilitator to develop and “nurture” the CoP is a requirement for such an initiative. When developing a CoP of undergraduate students, Gomes (2015) found that his intervention as a researcher/facilitator, proposing strategies to minimize the asymmetry of students' participation, enhanced their engagement in the CoP initiatives and, consequently, in the negotiation of meanings and critical reflections on the CoP domain. On the other hand, Stoszowski and Collins (2014), when using a blog as a resource to develop a CoP of coaches students, found that the lack of autonomy of some of them for the reflective process limited their mutual engagement in the group's initiatives/activities, hindering the negotiation of meanings and the development of the CoP among students.

One of the main challenges in studies focused on to develop CoPs has been to facilitate the mutual engagement of coaches in shared CoP initiatives. Although it is evident that the configurations of sports systems reinforce the idea of coaches as rivals, it should be noted that learning through participation in CoPs does not

reduce the relevance of competition and sporting success (GILBERT; GALLIMORE; TRUDEL; 2009). Moreover, encouraging coaches to participate in other types of social learning spaces (networks, discussions, workshops, and clinics) may lead them to constitute CoPs in the future. In the university context, it is remarkable that the different interests among CoP members and the mandatory nature of the proposed topics may make it difficult for students to engage in the negotiation of meanings to change their knowledge for coaching (JONES; MORGAN; HARRIS, 2012).

The conception that learning in CoPs exclusively implies collective results has been a reminder in the coaching research agenda (MALLETT, 2010). On the other hand, research using the value creation framework highlights the creation of personal immediate values that are developed through coaches' participation in CoP and related to their competencies for pedagogical intervention (BERTRAM; CULVER; GILBERT, 2016; 2017). Study with Canadian wheelchair curling coaches, Duarte (2020) highlighted that all CoP members developed personal values associated with a sense of inclusion, achieving other points of view, and interactions with coaches from other generations (novice and experienced). The results of such studies suggest that research longitudinal approaches may contribute to identify learning values that are more complex and take longer to develop.

### 3.1 PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES TO SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

The potential of STL for analyzing and promoting coach learning has increased in recent years, particularly because it considers that engagement in social practices is the central process through which learning occurs (CASSIDY; ROSSI, 2006). The perspective is that the "body of knowledge" for coaches' professional work corresponds to an "alive" structure, comprising a complex system of inter-relationships between CoPs and other social learning spaces in which coaches participate. Thus, their competencies and their identity result from their particular "journey" in this complex landscape (WENGER-TRAYNER *et al.*, 2015). This perspective responds to the contextual and social nature of coaches' pedagogical actions, indicating a possibility to analyze the pragmatic and problematic nature of coaches' learning (CULVER; KRAFT, 2017).

The scope of the approach that STL proposes to learning phenomenon is based on the integration of several theories that have similar perspectives (WENGER, 2010). However, Wenger-Trayner (2013) recommends about the need to understand the assumptions of each theory, its focus of analysis, technical language, as well as what kind of theoretical and scientific argumentation it seeks to contribute. Related to the research process, this approach allows researchers to integrate conceptual components that are useful for "telling a more complete or new stories" about learning (WENGER-TRAYNER, 2013), influencing researchers epistemological position and methodological decisions (CULVER; KRAFT, 2017).

A relevant possibility has been the adoption of participatory and post-positivist research paradigms, allowing for different levels of analysis and methodological approaches (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed) (WENGER-TRAYNER *et al.*, 2019). With particular attention to mixed-method research, the inconsistencies resulting from integrating the components of the investigative process of quantitative and qualitative

research must be considered. This does not mean that contradictions should not be accepted or that they should be considered a typical weakness of research in such an approach (DENSCOMBE, 2008). The recommendation is that the types of research procedures should be selected and justified from clear epistemological assumptions and also from their “practical value” for dealing with the specific study question (WENGER-TRAYNER *et al.*, 2019).

Other specific methodological recommendations include thoroughly exploring and describing how CoPs are designed and implemented in real environments (LI *et al.*, 2009). Using a non-prescriptive approach, researchers acting as facilitators in the development of coaches' CoPs can promote a safe learning environment and enhance the negotiation of meanings among coaches (CULVER; TRUDEL; WERTHNER, 2009). A systemic view of these professionals' workplace (social learning systems and landscape of practice) can allow the facilitator to integrate the different levels of the sports system in CoP initiatives so as to better fit coaches' learning needs (DUARTE; CULVER; PAQUETTE, 2020). Longitudinal data collection periods, across a full sports season are also suggested to gain a more detailed understanding of how knowledge is created by coaches when participating in a CoP (GARNER; HILL, 2017; STOSZKOWSKI; COLLINS, 2014).

Information and communication technologies provide tools that help to promote CoPs and other social learning spaces, as well as to obtain data (quantitative and qualitative) on coaches' learning. Web 2.0 platforms (blogs, chat rooms and social networks) allow coaches to participate in virtual social learning environments and receive constant support for their development, with lower levels of financial cost, less time and over long distances (DUARTE; CULVER; PAQUETTE, 2020; STOSZKOWSKI; COLLINS, 2014). The challenge is to implement different technological resources for social interaction among coaches that fit the potential and specificities of each learning context.

Some main research topics are to analyze how time influences the establishment of a CoP and the coaches' identity development process within online courses/programs, as well as how to encourage coaches' mutual engagement in shared initiatives through technological resources (STOSZKOWSKI; COLLINS, 2014). Although a wide gradient of technological resources to offer new tools for social interaction, they do not comprise a CoP itself or a social learning space (WENGER, 2010). Furthermore, when implemented by a researcher/facilitator, the routines and natural rhythm development of a CoP or other forms of social organization should be considered (ROCHA; PEREIRA, 2017).

To adopt the STL in the research focused on coaches' learning inform an expansion of epistemological, conceptual and research directions in this field. Considering learning as a process of participation in social practices is an important alternative to overcome the perspective of learning based exclusively on the direct acquisition and decontextualized reproduction of knowledge. Thus, STL provides an analytical and instrumental framework to understand and promote coaches' learning, in a perspective that fit the complexity of the contexts of sports coaching and the current changes in communication and social interaction.

## 4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The perspective presented in this theoretical essay integrate a current scientific debate concerning sports coaches' learning and professional development. It was highlighted that STL provides a broad analytical and instrumental framework, in a continuum, which, at one end, allows the analysis and promotion of learning while participating in a CoP, and expands to the other end where learning occurs (or can be promoted) from the coaches' engagement in different practices and social interactions, related to a wide and complex "landscape of practice".

The numerous research directions in the sports coaches' research agenda reflect the wide conceptual framework that constitute STL. The contributions from these studies attend the need to use theoretical approaches that preserve the complexity, social nature and contextual character of coaches' learning. Studies with mixed methods designs indicate the possibility of greater coverage of the data obtained, but they are highly complex for researchers decisions. There is an interactive and dynamic process underway between obtaining empirical data on learning and constantly improving the STL.

Although it is considered that the topics were sufficiently addressed, without claiming to be a conclusive analysis in the discussions presented, a series of possible topics for exploration and for a more in-depth discussion about the STL can emerge from the content presented in this theoretical essay. Furthermore, the way that the content was presented comprises a current understanding, which is subject to renewed views and interpretations.

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**Resumo:** O objetivo deste ensaio teórico foi apresentar a Teoria Social da Aprendizagem (TSA) e indicar como o quadro conceitual adjacente tem sido utilizado nas investigações sobre a aprendizagem e o desenvolvimento de treinadores esportivos. A TSA oferece um escopo analítico e instrumental amplo, com potencial para a compreensão e a promoção da aprendizagem do treinador. Os direcionamentos temáticos emergentes na agenda investigativa nesta área refletem a amplitude do quadro conceitual que constitui a TSA. As contribuições destes estudos contemplam a demanda de se utilizar matrizes teóricas que preservem a complexidade, a natureza social e o caráter contextual da aprendizagem dos treinadores.

**Palavras chave:** Aprendizagem. Educação Física e Treinamento. Esportes. Teoria Social.

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este ensayo teórico fue presentar la Teoría Social del Aprendizaje (TSA) y mostrar cómo el cuadro conceptual adyacente ha sido utilizado en las investigaciones sobre el aprendizaje y el desarrollo de entrenadores deportivos. La TSA ofrece un marco analítico e instrumental amplio, con potencial para la comprensión y promoción del aprendizaje del entrenador. Los rumbos temáticos que emergen en la agenda investigativa del área reflejan la amplitud del marco conceptual que constituye la TSA. Los aportes de estos estudios contemplan la demanda de utilizar matrizes teóricas que preserven la complejidad, la naturaleza social y el carácter contextual del aprendizaje de los entrenadores.

**Palabras clave:** Aprendizaje. Educación Física y entrenamiento. Deportes. Teoría social.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

**Vinicius Zeilmann Brasil:** Text writing, theory study, selection and analysis of studies on sports coaches' learning.

**Valmor Ramos:** Text analysis and general revision.

**Ana Flávia Backes:** Writing, text formatting and general revision.

**Leonardo Ristow:** Writing, text formatting and general revision.

**Michel Milistetd:** Theory study, analysis of research on coaches' learning and text general revision.

**Juarez Vieira do Nascimento:** Text analysis and general revision.

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### EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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