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# Impressionistic protectiveness, team formation and alignment building in coach education work: an ethnographic study

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**ABSTRACT**

Studies on collective impression management in the sport coaching literature have begun to illuminate the backstage and frontstage techniques used by teams of professional sport coaches. This study is the first to examine team assembly, deployment and alignment building within a neoliberal employment context. Data were generated via participant observation, fieldnotes, and semi-structured interviews. The data were subject to multiple rounds of emic and etic analysis, which were primarily sensitised by Goffman's dramaturgical theorising. Analysis revealed that (1) a neoliberal and contrived approach to team administration produced transient team relations and limited opportunities for alignment building, (2) short-term team associations resulted in cynical, pragmatic and instrumental orientations to staging activities, and (3) teams relied on deception and fabricated lines of action to translate curricula and navigate performativity culture. These findings offer a new agenda for researching practitioner collaboration and a stimulus to refine administrative procedures and role preparation programmes.

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Goffman; impression management; team performance; back region; coach education; ethnography

## Introduction

Matters of collective impression management, joint work and collegial relations have received increased scrutiny in the wider sport coaching literature in recent years (e.g. Gale et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2025). Such inquiry has drawn heavily on Goffman's dramaturgical (e.g. 1959) and post-dramaturgical (e.g. 1969, 1974) theorising to examine practitioners' independent and collective communicative fluencies in the construction and presentation of personas (or auras), ideas and versions of reality in their social interaction(s) with alters. In the case of joint work and colleagueship, some scholars (e.g. Gale et al., 2019, 2025; Nelson et al., 2025) have painted a less-than-harmonious picture of collegial relations, one in which distrust, suspicion, deception and strategic approaches to interaction are a feature of everyday workplace engagements. Relatedly, these scholars, and others (e.g. Ives et al., 2021; Potrac et al., 2012), have shed light on the contextual backdrop against which these activities unfold, citing the precarity associated with neoliberal working conditions (e.g. short-term employment contracts, constant evaluation, decentralisation), competitiveness and densely connected relational networks as amongst the most salient influences on employee relations.

Lately, an emerging body of work has begun to address the more cooperative and functional aspects of joint work, directly or indirectly, through collective impression management. On one hand, collective action has been presented in a transient and individualistic fashion, with practitioners displaying solidarity only temporarily to sustain deceptions – *fabrications* (Goffman, 1974) – to navigate performativity exercises (e.g. audits) and protect self-serving group interests (e.g. Nelson et al., 2025; O'Gorman et al., 2021). On the other, teams of practitioners and their staging activities are shown as more durable, collaborative and stable in character, where team-careers are steeped in history and the development of trust and solidarity (e.g. Britton et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2024; Potrac & Jones, 2009). Reflecting the latter, Hall et al. (2024) revealed

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the techniques used by a team of high-performance rugby coaches in preparation for, and in the enactment, maintenance, and evaluation of a collective coaching performance. Their findings showed that the coaches' preparatory activities included the prudent construction of *scripts*, exchange of differences and the strategising of coaching positions and responsibilities, driven by a mutual recognition of fallibility and the importance of a unified and credible team image for pedagogical success (Goffman, 1959). Similarly, Britton et al. (2025) found that a team of paralympic coaches scrutinised logistics (e.g. timings) and devised a shared language through *scripts* to appear coordinated in the pursuit of buy-in from athletes (Goffman, 1959).

Problematically, comparable investigations are absent from the coach education literature, rendering speculative any understanding of how coach educators "accomplish group life in practice" (Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 29). Despite growing interest in their professional identities (e.g. Davidson & Townsend, 2023), learning (Redgate et al., 2022), translation of policy (Dempsey et al., 2021) and discourse-laden practice(s) (Cushion et al., 2022), in-depth analyses of the dramaturgical and relational undertaking(s) of coach educators' work remain largely invisible.

The limited available research, which addresses the performative, emotional and (micro)political features of their work, has typically explored the experiences of coach educators (e.g. Allanson et al., 2021; Cushion et al., 2019; Maskrey et al., 2025; Watts et al., 2023) and mentors (e.g. Ives et al., 2024) from a solitary perspective. The participants in these studies underlined the significance of individuals playing a "symbolic and relational game" to secure the support, respect, and trust of stakeholders (e.g. line-managers, coach learners; Cushion et al., 2019, p. 544). Allanson et al. (2021) found that coach educators attached a premium to managing their presentation(s) of self (e.g. emotions, appearance) to achieve prescribed (coach learning) and personally desirable (reputation, working relationships) outcomes. Allanson et al. (2021) also hinted at the lack of coordination which featured in coach educators' acts of teamwork. Insofar, such accounts have revealed that their independent and joint work is replete with social and organisational constraints (e.g. administrative issues, ad-hoc work, collegial conflict, precarity, monitoring, network ties, self-interest) requiring a consideration of "what they do, when, how, and why" (Allanson et al., 2021, p. 371). Despite concerns for their working relations with co-deliverers, it remains unclear how such engagements are managed and approached.

While welcome contributions, the paucity of inquiry into the use of collective impression management by teams of coach educators seems remiss given the unique work context of coach education. Crucially, small-scale teams of coach educators are often assembled, deployed and expected to collaborate to translate policy and curricula into tangible outcomes related to the initiatives and objectives of Sport Governing Bodies (SGBs) and national governments, while adhering to the signature pedagogies of the former (Walsh & Carson, 2019; Watts et al., 2023). Their joint labour is pertinent because, in coach development systems (CDS), coach educators are responsible for enhancing coach learning and improving coaching practice(s) through the (influential) delivery of module-based certification courses and assessment of enrolled practitioners (Allanson et al., 2021; Culver et al., 2019). To date, the dominant use of sundry retrospective interviews, combined with introductory theorising, has fallen short of intricate understanding(s) of the *doing* of such teamwork, inclusive of acts of cooperation, coordination and conflict, necessitating research that gets get closer to coach educators "collaborating in the here and now, getting life done" (Becker, 2014, p. 187).

Developing Allanson et al. (2021), this study is the first to combine dramaturgical (e.g. Goffman, 1959) and relational (e.g. Bauman, 2000; Crossley, 2011) theorising with ethnographic methods to examine the "fundamentally problematic and intersubjectively achieved nature of group life" in coach education work (Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 08). The paper breaks new ground by using untapped concepts to unpack how coach educators independently and collectively make sense of, engage in and reflect on team assembly, deployment, formation and alignment building, including what strategies are employed, how, when, where and why some lines of action are pursued over others. It also extends the broader sport coaching literature, whereby team assembly, deployment and formation have received little-to-no sustained attention, and only preliminary findings regarding alignment building in high-performance sport have been presented. Responding to calls to look harder *with* and *at* Goffman's oeuvre (e.g. Potrac, 2019), this research homes in on the yet unrealised way(s) in which the abovementioned aspects of collective impression management incorporate attitudes, constraints, opportunities, dilemmas and ambiguities reflective of contemporary

sports work employment. The practical relevance of this research transcends coach education work to inform organisational policies in sport regarding the administration and training of practitioner teams and encouraging collaborators to (re)consider and *do* differently their intra- and interpersonal engagements in teamwork.

## Methodology

### Paradigm

The principles of Aristotelian Interpretivism guided the research process (Potrac et al., 2025). This view holds that group association is integral to "comprehending all notions of human meaning, purpose and interchange" (Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 25). Ontologically, reality is viewed as context-dependent, fluid and shaped by ongoing community-based interaction. Epistemologically, this perspective situates individuals' agentic action, social activity, meaning making and biographical compulsions in linguistic understanding(s) symbolic of culturally derived language and standpoints of the "groups in which [they] live, learn and act" (Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 30). Here, priority is given to closely examining, in-situ, how individuals variously and reflexively "engage in and sustain activities" in both collective and solitary terms (p. Grills & Prus, 2019, p. 30). We (the research team), then, positioned the participants' joint preparations as something *in the making*, adjustive and negotiated, made sense of and engaged independently and collectively, grounded in shared meaning(s) and understandings of the constraints, tensions and opportunities that featured in their navigation of social and organisational lifeworlds (Grills & Prus, 2019). We agreed that sustained ethnographic methods combined with sociological theorising would allow us to closely examine the range of activities undertaken jointly and the viewpoints of those involved in the accomplishment of group life (Grills & Prus, 2019).

### Research(ed) context and participants

The fieldwork was conducted in two UK organisations that form part of a national network of county-based subsidiary businesses of *The Coach Support Group* or *TCSG* (a pseudonym). TCSG is one of the largest, most prestigious and encompassing providers of coach education in the world and is usually off limits to academic researchers. Their regional hubs are responsible for the local administration, monitoring and promotion of TCSG's strategy. Their coach education remit includes providing informal (e.g. online resources), non-formal (e.g. mentoring) and formal (e.g. certification courses) learning opportunities (Mallett et al., 2009). The nature of the services offered by TCSG means that coach educators deliver activities both at central venues (e.g. on site) and remotely (e.g. in schools and clubs). In total, three full-time and six part-time (or sessional) coach educators participated in the research. These consisted of managerial- (Logan; Parker), senior- (Trevor; William; Mike; Stuart; Barry) and entry-level-equivalent employees (Dan; Patrick).

The negotiation of initial access to participants and research sites was enabled through the lead author's – Callum's – connections and relational histories with key stakeholders at TCSG (i.e. friend; mentee; colleague). Therefore, the employed sampling strategy was purposive in nature, with Callum leveraging his personal network and insider familiarity with the research setting to recruit individuals whose work reality entailed relevant contextual and dramaturgical phenomena (Tracy, 2020). While the formal institutional protocols for ethical approval and informed consent were adhered to, the process of gaining access was grounded in Callum's ad-hoc and informal conversations with participants in coffee shops, car parks and pubs. His embeddedness within the relational and micropolitical landscape of the setting also helped him secure largely unrestricted autonomy to move freely amongst social spaces and get close to moments of "exchange and reciprocity" (Manning, 2014, p. 293).

### Ethnographic fieldwork

Data were generated via a methodological bricolage consisting of (a) extended participant observations, (b) fieldnotes, and (c) cyclical semi-structured interviews. Together, these methods unveiled aspects of group

life that may have remained hidden if only a single-method approach was adopted (Tracy, 2020). Callum observed 151 hours of team activities related to the planning, enactment and evaluation of Level 1 and Level 2 coach education courses. His observations facilitated a closer look at the situations that ordinarily arose in the participants' everyday work and how social processes *played out* within them (i.e. *what* participants did, *how*, *when*, *where*, and *with whom*; Becker, 1958). He entered into a progressively focused ebb and flow of involvement and detachment that allowed him to partially integrate with, see, overhear and probe what he suspected to be *front* or *back region* activity (Wolcott, 1999). Mostly, this entailed loitering in certain spaces (e.g. corridors, carparks), *hanging about* on the edges of interaction (e.g. sitting with participants), and completely immersing himself within team acts (e.g. planning discussions). Callum's decision to participate (or not) in group dialogue was tethered to his relationships with the participants and familiarity with the "local pragmatics" of the setting (O'Brien, 2019, p. 959). In other words, his access to data was dependent on small, but frequent, interpersonal efforts that both confirmed his insiderness *and* fashioned sufficient agency to conduct the fieldwork.

Callum recorded his observations via fieldnotes. When in-situ, he used jottings (e.g. shorthand) to describe the spatial (e.g. room layout), physical (e.g. setting), behavioural (e.g. bodily comportment) and audible (e.g. language, tone) features of social exchange (Emerson et al., 2011; Tracy, 2020). He also wrote down any ad-hoc conversations, emerging questions and tentative theoretical ideas or gaps that could be explored at depth during interviews. His level of involvement and spatial position(s) shaped the nature of his jottings (Coffey, 1999). Participatory acts allowed Callum to record the substance of *back region* interactions, whereas a marginal perspective lent itself to describing the physical demarcation of regions. To start with, he attempted to render scenes unfamiliar through comprehensive and systematic notetaking (Garfinkel, 1967). Callum then gradually shifted to a saliency approach when he noticed patterns arising from the authors' ongoing analysis (Emerson et al., 2011; Tracy, 2020). He transformed his jottings into full fieldnotes shortly after observations (e.g. in the evening) and drafted a brief commentary on the data (Tracy, 2020; Wolcott, 2001). Fieldnotes were organised into interaction groupings (e.g. regions) and consisted of sketches (e.g. photo-like details of scenes), episodic tales (e.g. descriptions of incidents), and transitional summaries (e.g. accounts of Callum's movements; Emerson et al., 2011; Tracy, 2020).

Over 55 hours of semi-structured interview data were generated and transcribed. Twenty-two interviews were conducted in total, ranging from 60 to 220 minutes in duration. All of the participants, except Trevor, took part in a minimum of two interviews. Other commitments (e.g. family, coaching) prevented his participation, though he and Callum frequently engaged in extensive discussion about observations in-situ. The cyclical approach entailed multiple interviews with each participant, which enabled progressively sophisticated discussions about the fieldnotes and conceptual ideas, as well as aspects of collaboration that could not be sufficiently probed or directly observed in-situ (Grills & Prus, 2019). The interviews shed light on *why* the participants engaged in collective acts in the way(s) they did and how their rationale(s) were indicative of meanings associated with group life at TCSG; informing sense-making and what Callum attended to in-situ (Grills & Prus, 2019). The interviews, which covered a range of topics (e.g. collective staging), gave participants an opportunity to share reflections on aspects of teamwork that they may have withheld in the presence of colleagues. He was also able to ask questions relating to gaps within the wider data and his theoretical sense-making (Tracy, 2020).

Reflexivity was necessary to appreciate the "strangeness of an obstinately familiar world" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 38). Mostly, Callum did this by asking naïve questions about the fieldwork (e.g. "what is going on here?") and examining theories that challenged his interpretation of the data (Coffey, 1999; Tracy, 2020). He also held frequent conversations with critical friends (i.e. co-authors), who asked provocative questions and offered alternative viewpoints that revealed observational "blind spots" and opened up the data and fieldwork in new ways (Townsend & Cushion, 2021, p. 263). Similarly, the participants were invited to engage in member reflections; to add their interpretation(s) of events alongside the authors' to make visible any meanings or *goings on* that may have been overlooked (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## Data analysis: a phronetic-iterative approach

A phronetic-iterative approach to data analysis was adopted (Tracy, 2020). Analysis entailed continuously shifting between data generation, emic and etic perspectives, and the scrutiny of emergent data, meaning(s),

and analytical insights alongside co-authors and participants (Tracy, 2020). Emic phases of analysis consisted of inductive (re)readings of interview transcripts and fieldnotes, as well as line-by-line primary-cycle coding, which involved assigning descriptive words to those data (e.g. *discussions about timing*) while remaining loyal to the participants' language, meaning(s) and interaction(s) as the project unfolded and our sense-making evolved. Conceptual buckets were created and revised to reflect emerging trends amongst codes, alongside ongoing memo writing and mapping exercises linking evolving analytical ideas to the wider project which, together, drew our (the research team's) attention to the salient features of group life for the participants (Tracy, 2020). Emic phases of analysis involved critiquing, synthesising, and organising descriptive codes into hierarchical categories (Tracy, 2020). For example, *discussion about timing* became part of the category *logistical preparation*. Here, attention turned to analysing activities, meaning(s) and concepts which tethered (evolving) codes.

Our inductive (re)readings of the data and contentions about what *might* be happening were primarily sensitised by Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theorising. We found significant value and resonance in his writings on the composition and organisation of *performance teams* (Goffman, 1959). In this case, we were able to locate the participants' experience(s) within a group "of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine" (Goffman, 1959, p. 85). His work had utility in considering the role(s) and contribution of individual *team-members*, those relied upon to successfully sustain the projected image or stance of a team, both within and to preparatory activities (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's (1959) coining of *performance directors* was particularly useful in this regard, allowing us to grasp hierarchical team relations, such as identifying those responsible for providing direction, establishing coordination and a unifying party line.

Goffman (1959) offered a rich vocabulary for explicating the mechanics underlying how performance teams constructed and generated desirable team performances. His distinction between *front* and *back regions* proved a fruitful starting point for considering the nature and function of team activities (Goffman, 1959). The *front region* refers to settings where a *clean* public performance is given to scrutinising audiences (e.g. workshop delivery), while the *back region* denotes (often physically partitioned) spaces where team-members privately (re)convene to manage the flow of disruptive *secrets*, and prepare, repair, reflect upon, and modify their performances (Goffman, 1959). We also found Goffman's (1959) observation of *communication out of character* a useful concept for appreciating the various interactional forms of *back region* exchange between team-members. For example, *staging talk* spoke to matters associated with the staging of team performances, including role deployment, instruction, prudence and the evaluation of previous performances. *Team collusion* encapsulated incidents where teams employed and devised collusive tactics intended to be conveyed "in such a way as to cause no threat to the illusion that is being fostered for the audience" (Goffman, 1959, p. 135). Relatedly, *treatment of the absent* attended to the private treatment and targeting (e.g. collusive tactics) of audience members (Goffman, 1959).

It was clear that certain aspects of the participants' lifeworlds spoke to Goffman's (1959) theorising. For example, *logistical preparation resembled staging talk*, and a close interrogation of the lifecycle of the participants' team performances (e.g. pre-workshop, workshop delivery, and post-workshop) allowed us to locate collective activity in regions. Despite the utility of Goffman's (1959) ideas, our recursive and inductive (re)reading of data revealed various gaps in our sense making as the study evolved. We realised that his dramaturgical theorising as a standalone device was insufficient for explaining, with fidelity, the participants' experiences of and engagement in purposeful and social collective activity. Goffman's (1959) text failed to capture the contextual backdrop in which collective team performances were variably understood and constructed. For example, the neoliberal relational and employment conditions endured by performance teams in contemporary sport work settings (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Bauman, 2000).

Such impasses stimulated introspection and the exploration of other complementary theoretical perspectives that could plausibly augment our sense making gaps. Following bouts of contemplation, we identified the theorising of Bauman (2000), Crossley (2011), Hargreaves's (1994), Scott (2015) and Goffman (1974) as enriching perspectives reflective of the unfolding data. Hargreaves (1994) work on *contrived collegiality* informed our assessment of the administration of performance teams and the way(s) in which team assembly, deployment, work location and translation were centrally regulated, prescribed, and implementation orientated. It helped us to comprehend the mandate- and objective-contingent purpose of teamwork and nature of team careers, including the perceived constraints placed on collaboration. Relatedly, Bauman's (2000) conceptualisation of *liquid modernity* offered a lens for

expressing how neoliberal orientations to team administration and monitoring influenced the participants' independent engagement(s) in team activities and the meaning(s) attached to the bonds and obligations that shaped team relations.

Crossley's (2011) analysis of relational networks shed light on the relative strengths and weaknesses of relational ties between *team-members*, as well as the way(s) in which the participants' preparatory exchanges were coloured by a collective sense of the conventions, relationships and interconnections that structured the TCSG network. Scott's (2015) text allowed us to look beyond the, at times, limited value of Goffman's dated theorising. Broadly, Scott (2015) presents a revised and developed version of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, one that is in keeping with the individual and collective dramaturgical demands characteristic of modern society and workplaces. Goffman's (1974) thesis was used to contextualise the anticipated cumulative effect(s) of the participants' joint preparations on the versions of reality fostered for the audience, such as how projected events reflected understanding(s) of team goals.

While we appreciate that a suite of theories were consulted to make sense of our analysis, we believe these ideas authentically captured the participants' experiences of organisational and group social life, providing insights into the contextual backdrop of their dramaturgical performances. For us, this demonstrates our commitment to exercising agency over concepts and not merely accepting data at face value (Jones, 2019). In doing so, our subsequent (re)reading and understanding of the data was more theoretically robust and rounded, but one which remained close to the participants' experiences. Our rounds of analysis concluded with a series of summarising analytical memos which incorporated these ideas to refine conceptual narratives and themes specific to the distinct lifecycle of the participants' team performances (e.g. pre-workshop; workshop delivery; post-workshop). This paper homes in on the participants' joint activities pre-workshop.

## Results and discussion

Our analysis highlighted that the participants' joint planning endeavours were driven by *impressionistic protectiveness* (Goffman, 1959). That is, the participant coach educators' preparations were laced with the desire to construct believable, influential and impenetrable collective performances. In this section, we discuss two themes that characterised the participants' pre-course planning activities both prior to *and* upon arrival at venues; matters of *team formation* and *team execution*. First, we introduce organisational and contextual constraints on teamwork, as well as issues of team assembly, structure, and role allocation. Second, we illustrate the acts of cooperation that lay beneath teams of coach educators' attempts to negotiate and develop tactics for carrying off coordinated team performances.

### *Team formation and organisation*

The arrangement of teams was subject to myriad intersecting constraints arising from the participants' work context. Problems arose from a *one-night-stand* approach to team deployment, where employees were "thrown together" on an ad-hoc, episodic and short-term basis for the sole purpose of implementing curricula. Speaking to Goffman's (1959) theorising, the infrequency with which participants "act[ed] as a team" to collectively deal with "matters that fall within impressional protectiveness" thwarted the nurturing of bonds, routines, and a *working consensus* (p. 88). In contrast to the *back region* familiarity that was a hallmark of Goffman's (1959) observations, Mike explained that team relations were transient, characterised by an ambiguity that inhibited planning activities:

> The whole thing around co-delivery, it's really difficult because what happens is that you basically just get thrown together with someone, it's not like you're delivering with the same person all of the time and my personality is that I need to try and suss that person out a little bit to fathom what's what, then you're expected to work together. That we only work together once a year is another thing, how're you meant to get to know how people like to work when it's only ever "it's been nice to work with you see you in six months"? Unless you've worked with someone before, planning can be quite standoffish because we don't really get a chance to find out what each other's strengths and weaknesses are.

From a managerial standpoint, Logan described team assembly and deployment as a usually makeshift exercise, constrained by tutor availability and expertise, contracts, licencing regulations and limited role preparation. A scarcity of resources meant that he was unable to select *team-members* who could be "trusted to perform properly" and cope with emergent and unpredictable situations (Goffman, 1959, p. 95). For Logan, this sometimes meant settling for a less-than-ideal composition of tutor teams, hamstrung by the necessity of developing new or less experienced tutors "on the job":

> I send out a spreadsheet with the course dates quarterly and I keep track of who says yes or no. There's a loose pressure for them to get their twenty-eight days in for their tutor-licenses, so I take that into account too. I'll chase people to work more if they need the days. We've got six tutors whose availability is tight due to other commitments, so it comes down who's available to work. Logic and reason don't come into it sometimes. I've had situations where there's a level two course and two level one tutors have ran it, or only one level two tutor was available. [Also] part-time tutors don't get any formal training for roles. The way we do it now is recruit based on skill set to innovate and adapt content. I'm the only full-time coach educator, [so] I'm expected to develop [them into] more competent deliverers. What that means for me is a total headache. I need to be savvy with the way that I pair tutors up to drive the learning home for [novices]. It's like a learning programme that they go through with more experienced tutors, we develop them on the job.

For *team-members*, the absence of formal preparation was a common frustration because it produced disparate understandings of pedagogy and the translation of course content Goffman (1959). Such inconsistency was particularly taxing for experienced tutors, who often ceded their own educational and preparatory standards to accommodate the skillset(s) of new employees, generate solidarity and avoid *performance disruptions* (Goffman, 1959). In Goffman's (1959) terms, tensions arose from a "relation of forced familiarity" and dramaturgical cooperation with less well-versed *team-mates* (p. 89). Mike alluded to the challenge of maintaining the quality of co-delivery while limiting mistakes:

> The breadth of some of the stuff that we need to deliver is ridiculous really. I know for a fact for some people the content will be way above their heads. Newer tutors I'm talking about mostly. It's a bloody tricky one. There're random things I throw in every now and again that're quite theoretical, that I need to put to one side. It's a shame because its decreases the value of the course but I try to avoid situations where they'll [co-tutors] be like "what the fuck's this" coz' if they've just started delivering and not seen the content before they won't even understand it never mind teaching it to candidates. The training we receive for it is zero so you can't fault [new tutors] really. The main thing is you just want to make sure content is delivered properly. Pitching things at the level I want is only going to open up a can of worms so I'm better off just leaving it to make sure the other tutor can support the session.

The time demands associated with full-time jobs (outside of coach education work) and family commitments for some meant that, in the days leading up to workshops, the organisation of team roles was reduced to brief, pragmatic exchanges via phone call, text or email. Unlike the fixed and stable character of *back region* activities outlined by Goffman (1959), a lack of access to, and control over, respective *back regions* restricted participants to settling for an unrehearsed, "[in]complete agenda before the event" and superficial discussions about "who is to do what" (p. 228). The resultant thin *party line* placed an increased emphasis on *team-members* drawing on implicit knowledge in mutually consistent way(s) to "plug gaps", which was problematic for new tutors (Goffman, 1959). On this, Dan commented:

> I don't know what my week's going to look like in terms of the kids. I don't want to commit to planning a phone call then cancelling because then I'll know nothing about the workshop. My full-time job at [charity], I thought I'd be finished at three today, but I've got loads to do. My days are forever changing with admin and staff chasing. It's a case of texting or emailing Logan a few times to make sure the 'Ts' and crossed and 'Is' are dotted until we're there on the day. I'm experienced enough as a coach educator to know the basics but I'm just not up-to-date with the level two modules and slides. All it needs is a brief word, then I can double check again when we're at the venue. There're probably loads of missed opportunities to co-deliver things this way but it's the reality of our hectic lives; take a bit each and try to get comfortable with the bit you're doing.

These exchanges were typically orchestrated by *team-members* – *performance directors* - considered more knowledgeable or those employed on full-time contracts (Goffman, 1959). Logan explained that the few days prior to workshops were often used to initiate *staging talk* to prime co-tutors for independent reflection and discussions that would later take place at venues (Goffman, 1959):

> I usually drop whoever I'm working with a text telling them to give me a ring when they're free. I said to [co-tutor] last week, "you're going to deliver this workshop next Friday. Go away and look at it. Make some notes. Got any questions give me a ring. We can iron out any issues". If someone says "I haven't delivered that workshop before" or "I want to do that" it'll help you allocate roles but also what you reflect on in the lead up to workshops. The other bit is what we did previously. The starting point should be "the activity we delivered last time out didn't quite work, did it? We need a different task this time around. Let's go away and think about how we can modify it".

The decentralised and remote nature of the participants' work rendered minimal teams' lack of control over respective *front regions*, thus forgoing the familiarity of performing on "one's home ground" (Goffman, 1959, p. 100). The centralised administration of courses meant that teams were unable to anticipate the conditions of the *setting* (e.g. venue) and *audience* (e.g. coach learners) in advance (Goffman, 1959). Echoing Goffman (1959), *team-members* were left in a position of "not knowing what character [they] will have to project from one minute to the next" (p. 137). Stuart noted that a diminished capacity for *dramaturgical circumspection* required teams to collectively adapt to uncertain, dynamic and immediately pressing situations upon their arrival at venues (Goffman, 1959):

> Some of the venues we deliver in are awful. The one at the minute is grim. I delivered in it last year and they told Trevor that we'd be in the same place. What happens when we turn up? They've stuck us in the bloody sports hall, echoey, cold, chairs are uncomfortable as hell. [We] planned through the week and were virtually sorted then we turn up and [they've] fucked us. There's no real point in doing all this planning because it's THAT unorganised. That's why it's important to be able to adapt and feel your way as you go. Things crop up and we don't know who we'll have in front of us so the plan might need revisited anyhow. I'd say that the real work begins when we see the register at the start.

The participants attempted to manage these constraints through strategic role allocation, mapping the expertise of *team-members* to workshop content and objectives (Goffman, 1959). *Team-members* considered more experienced or knowledgeable fulfilled hybrid roles akin to a *performance director* and *training specialist* (Goffman, 1959). In other words, they were responsible for "direct[ing] and [control[ling] the progress of dramatic action" and, in the case of unbalanced status teams, mentoring junior colleagues in the construction of desirable impressions (Goffman, 1959, p. 101). Team directors were appointed based their perceived ability to remain *dramaturgically circumspect* (e.g. foresee challenges), *disciplined* (e.g. deliver confidently), and *loyal* (e.g. stay on script; Goffman, 1959). They were trusted to quickly engender respect through clear content translation, avoiding *faux pas* (e.g. giving incorrect information) and *unmeant gestures* (e.g. fumbling when challenged; Goffman, 1959). Logan and Dan implied that a mutual commitment to projecting a positive, idealised team image was crucial to persuading cohorts of (scrutinising) learners and the timely achievement of prescribed outcomes.

> It's about matching up tutor expertise and strengths with specific workshops. [With Dan] I took the lead on workshop one, two, three and four. This is my full-time job, I know the content and resources. Through trial and error, I've learned that from the get go coaches need information that isn't explicitly clear in TCSG's scheme of work. Dan hasn't done this before, so he needs to see it first. If [newer] tutors start relaying messages that aren't quite right, you can't really bring it back without saying "actually, that's not right, you only get two in-situ visits or you only get one visit" or whatever it might be. Learners need clarity of what this course is about, so I step in to make sure those messages are really clear and that sets the foundation for the rest of the course. We need to avoid situations where candidates start to question whether you know what you're talking about and the reputation of what you're delivering. A couple of our educators are specialists in nutrition and performance analysis, so they'll lead that stuff. They have that credibility and confidence, the expertise to add detail around content and handle questions, stuff like that. Further down the line what [we're] avoiding is confusion and the duplication of questions.

> We were conscious that I didn't know the running order of level two workshops, so we agreed that I take the lead on five and six, when I'm more familiar. Logan is full-time and he's spent years adapting and delivering content, [so] he's taking the theory and I'm doing a good chunk of the practical. I wouldn't want to say or do something in the classroom that's being covered in two weeks. The first couple of workshops are quite volatile. That's your most important buy-in time where you can get [learners] on board with what you're trying to do and show you're here because you want to improve these people as paying customers. If I said something that was wrong or if somebody disagreed and I didn't argue my case properly I'd lose integrity. Make a good first impression and they'll trust you. Lose their respect too early you might not get them back and if you get them for an in-situ visit how're they going to take your feedback seriously if they don't believe in what you're saying.

Team directors prudently deployed apprentice or less well-versed *team-members* in "safe" supporting roles that steered them away from undesirable situations and to observe the modelling of "good" practice (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, junior colleagues were considered to lack the discretion, prudence, and "presence of mind" necessary to avoid *performance disruptions* (Goffman, 1959, p. 210). Thus, team directors employed *protective practices* to safeguard others' image and to "save the [individual and collective] definition of the situation projected" (Goffman, 1959, pp. 24–25). Echoing Goffman's (1959) ideas on *rhetoric of training*, directors allocated roles strategically to convince learners that *team-members* had completed a "mystical range and period of training" (p. 55). Logan reflected on the importance of *benign fabrications* (i.e. well-meaning collusive acts) in the concealment of *secrets* and the smooth delivery of workshops and inviting desired treatment (e.g. respect) from learners (Goffman, 1959, 1974):

> I tried to give Dan the workshops where there were some easy messages to deliver, which means we can avoid situations where there are a couple of grey areas, "what does this mean, what does that mean" sort of stuff. The other part of it is that there're some workshops that have complex content, but Dan's going to have to eventually deliver it and do the thinking process for himself. As much as I want to avoid him being out in the front struggling, what I do need to do is make sure that he's actually done the thinking and the thought process behind it so that he could potentially deliver it himself without me being there. We also want to avoid the situation where the examples given to the group are questioned but not questioned in an inquisitive way where [candidates] want further information. It's a question in terms of "are you sure that's right?". If we then get into that debate about is this right or is this wrong and [Dan] is not rock solid about [the] information there can some be self-doubt, which becomes quite apparent to the learners. The credibility thing then is that the role of the tutor doesn't just exist for this workshop. If you've been challenged and haven't come out of the other side of it that could last the whole course.

Logan spoke at length about how his decision to conceal Dan's *actual* status was driven by the consequences of a spoilt performance for activities that required an independent but coordinated approach (e.g. in-situ visits). He explained that a team's collective capacity to direct and assess learner progression within time constraints was reliant on favourable evaluations of each tutor's independent contributions. Dramaturgically speaking, Logan was aware of how much *loyalty* and *discipline* he could rely on from Dan and anticipated his potential to "discredit his own [as well as] a team-mate's performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 203). Clearly, Logan and Dan were tethered by an interdependency resulting in "one practitioner depend[ing] on the good conduct of others" (Crossley, 2011, p. 164). Logan elaborated, describing role allocation as a protective and reparative strategy (Goffman, 1959):

> When we get to the point of divvying up the groups for in-situ visits, we don't want people in my group to say "yes, this is great" and "oh, no" if they are with Dan. Learners can't be sat there thinking 'I would be getting a better experience if I was with Logan' or that I have been unfair. Same with the workshops, we can't afford for learners to tune out when Dan delivers. Really disrupts the running of the course. Dan needs to show that he is capable of taking them on a journey. We need to make sure that if we're unsure of something [before workshops] we can get it sorted so that we can avoid a situation. So it might be that if Dan has struggled in one workshop, we just make sure the next one he leads on there are no grey areas, there is a real clarity of message, it's simple to deliver. It rebuilds his confidence. It rebuilds the learner's confidence in him as a tutor because he delivered something that was powerful. They go away and walk in the house, "how was the Level Two tonight", "oh yeah, Dan did this thing it was really good". Sorted. Straight away they are back in the mindset of 'the tutor is really powerful again'. Right where we want it.

Decisions regarding role deployment spanned mere concerns about implementation, reflecting a sensitivity to the evaluative mechanisms of which *team-members*' independent and collective work performances were subjected to, inclusive of *strong* and *weak ties* populating the TCSG network (Crossley, 2011). For example, Stuart explained that positive candidate feedback was (in)directly visible to line managers at TCSG and integral to *dramatically realising* the value of team performances (Goffman, 1959). Stuart highlighted positive feedback as a vehicle for attending to both collective and self-interests:

> . . . it's a good opportunity to show that you're adding value. It's quite important that if jobs come up in the future people like Patrick have a good reputation. TCSG selects which tutors they put on what courses and if I wasn't doing a good job and if [TCSG] weren't getting good feedback they wouldn't use me. That's happened in the past with other tutors, so I'm conscious of that. One thing I didn't like was how candidates found you on Twitter, but I've realised they'll tag you and TCSG on there and sing your praises. Someone from [HQ] might look at that and

> go 'well they're doing a good job'. If learners think I'm decent there'll be more demand for me and more people wanting to do our courses.

Learners and, via interdependency, *team-mates*, were considered *network brokers* (Crossley, 2011). That is, they functioned as a contextual resource for communicating the otherwise hidden value of the participants' work labour to office holders (Crossley, 2011). Reflecting on his managerial role, Logan talked about team assembly and deployment as a resource to cope with pressure(s) from national managers, hitting regional targets, and protecting locally negotiated way(s) of working. He claimed that strong metrics (e.g. enrolments, pass-fail rates) circumvented unwanted scrutiny:

> I think the reality of location, organisation, scale [and] volume means that what we do locally we don't really get on [national manager's] radar too much. Per region we're assessed on the amount of people that come through the door, so the reality is that we want the learners to go away thinking 'they know what they're talking about'. Part of the course is around them trying to sell the message back to their clubs and coaches and so on so if somebody asks them "what was it like last night?", what we want them to say is something positive, that they are clear on what they're going to do and they're enjoying the work. We need to avoid the flip conversation of that at all costs. It just means that I can keep the bear off my back and keep doing what we do and how we like to do it . . . do the essential tasks well and make sure the people who need to see it see it.

### *Building solidarity and alignment*

In the pursuit of alignment, preparatory discussions continued at venues up until the moments before content delivery began, and often in the presence of learners. *Team-members* employed *staging strategies* (e.g. music, arrival activities) to camouflage their last-minute deliberations which, if known, would have revealed discrediting *dark secrets* (e.g. lack of preparation; Goffman, 1959). Teams, typically led by directors, used these quasi-private *back regions* to initiate *staging talk*, which dealt with issues of timing, transitions, in-situ visits, cues, adaptations to schemes of work, engagement tactics and previous learner and tutor performances (Goffman, 1959). Discussions prioritised immediately arising matters, seemingly to prevent "confusions and lulls" in the short-term (Goffman, 1959, p. 221). The below fieldnote shows such an exchange taking place between Logan and Dan:

> Logan plays a *house music* album after the first couple of learners arrive. Dan sniggers, "He's got the Ibiza playlist out! Arrival activity is on the board, folks. Off you go". I follow into a nearby corridor to ask about the music. He said, "It's like hiding in plain sight really. We're trying to pull the wool over their eyes a little bit [laughs]. Not in a bad way, just it'll spoil the workshop if they overhear us sounding a bit unsure ten minutes before we start". A cocktail of music and discussion fogs the air, and Logan and Dan withdraw to the front of the room. They gather around a laptop, talking quietly, and gesture towards the screen [hands semi-covering mouths]. I decide to move closer. Logan is doing most of the talking. He instructs, "see this? This is you. I need you to remind them about last week before you come onto it properly. We need to bring them out of their *tell*, *tell*, *tell* comfort zone. What kind of questions are they asking their players? Do they? Why do or don't they do it? Get the juices flowing, then I'll hit them" [Dan nods attentively]. Logan continues, "If we organise the activity like this [pointing to the screen], make em' think, we're in. They're locked and loaded for going outside". They move on. Logan advises, "If they're looking a bit dull after the theory, you'll need to come in with a bang for your session design activity. You'll see the point they start to drift so don't dwindle too much on the content, alright?".

As shown, teams astutely manipulated spatio-temporal boundaries to distort learner perceptions (i.e. gathering around a laptop; see Figure 1), which was bolstered by each *team-member* prudently handling their "relaxation of appearances" – *decorum* – and paraverbal devices (e.g. whispering; Goffman, 1959, p. 220). Teams faced dynamic settings that exceeded Goffman's (1959) original contentions about the materially fixed, partitioned and bounded character of *front* and *back regions* (Goffman, 1959). Instead, the participants collectively dealt with fluid and blurred regions that rendered them *always on*. Thus, private exchanges became an observable feature of teams' dramaturgical performances.

A key function of *staging devices* was to conceal team tactics and prevent learners from "adapting effectively to the state of affairs the team is planning to bring about" (Goffman, 1959, p. 142). Minimising direct contact stopped learners from becoming privy to *strategic secrets* (e.g. ploys), as well as anticipating or suspecting the agendas underlying activities and requests (Goffman, 1959). The underlying intentions here speak to Goffman's (1959) notion of *mystification*; in this case the creation of distance to present an aura of spontaneity that facilitated control over learners. Logan stressed that *staging talk* developed the required

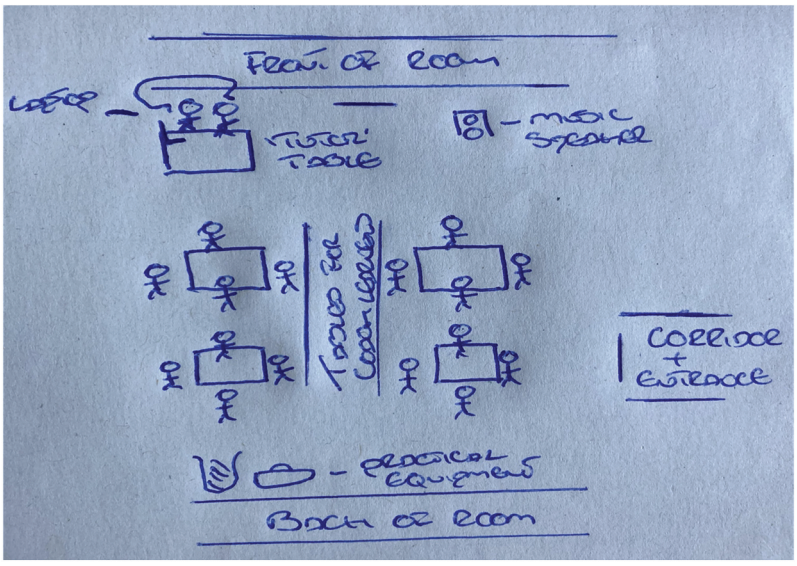


**Figure 1.** A fieldnote sketch illustrating the typical spatial layout of a classroom.

"in-the-know-ness" and *dramaturgical discipline* to protect team *secrets* and persuading learners to comply with tutor direction at face value (Goffman, 1959):

> I suppose if we're transparent with everything learners might become suspicious. I think back to when we did a task where one of the learners went, "oh, I thought that was going to be a trick. I thought you were setting us up for something there". On a couple of workshops they know that I've spun things to make them do the opposite thinking around a topic, like when I revealed the behavioural strategy I used to engage [leaner]. The next practical we did with group tasks one of the learners turned and said to me, "are you doing this because we've been silly?". They've obviously remembered the message and the strategy that I'd used, but when I set a task, I don't want them to think, 'oh god, he's onto us, he's using this because we're talking'. That's why it's useful to grab a few minutes before we kick off, "well, this is what we're going to tell them at this point to throw them of the scent". Because we have those chats, I don't have Dan glaring at me unknowingly from the other side of the room who's going save the day and drop me in it. I don't want to reveal the strategies we're using because they could double question us.

Some participants, more so those considered experienced or who shared a history of co-delivery, leaned on partly developed routines of *what works* to navigate time constraints and re-prioritise essential aspects of delivery for discussion. When working with well-versed co-tutors, Stuart confessed a tendency to gloss over content and role specifics to focus on more complex and novel matters:

> I emailed Trevor probably ten days before the workshop "Hi, how do you see the delivery going during the course?". He replied the next day, "I'm happy to deliver content exactly how we have before. Co-delivering. Just run with it". It's very informal, little discussions about who is bringing the flipchart paper and projector. As a full-time TCSG employee, he usually brings all of the paperwork and learning packs. We know the content and key messages inside out, so we just keep it brief. Like, at the weekend, because that stuff was out of the way, we could spend time looking at my new resources and sorting out practical delivery slots. It's the same with others. I know Patrick feels uncomfortable with theory on the level two, so that's literally a two-minute conversation to say "I'll take that".

*Team-members* pursued collective direction through the scrutiny of workshop content and exchange of ideas to establish "whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured" concerning the translation of TCSG curricula (Goffman, 1959, p. 21). Most of the participants demonstrated a mutual commitment to cooperation and pragmatic agreements that transcended personal preferences in favour of conforming to the objectives and goal(s) of the team (e.g. policy translation). Underlying this was a shared acknowledgement that cooperation and a *veneer of consensus* were fundamental to the accomplishment of work (i.e. successful implementation); the latter dependent on *team-members*' commitment to the party line and secrecy "about the fact that these positions were not independently arrived at" (Goffman, 1959, p. 93). As such, teams constructed loose *scripts*, based on prescribed content and outcomes, to buffer *front region*

solidarity, *loyalty*, *discipline* and *circumspection* (Goffman, 1959). Parker illustrated this, outlining the value of *scripts* for consistent independent performances, reducing incidents that could expose the transience of *back region* activities and relations (Goffman, 1959):

> If it was a case of tutor to tutor having a conversation and you say 'X' and I think 'Y', I'll say that I think 'Y' and we'll have that debate but what we need to agree on is something we're going to deliver. Where are we going to let it lie? What message do we need to deliver to the learners? And although I might think 'Y' and you think 'X', we need to come up with an agreed solution to how we're going to deliver it so there's some form of pre-agreed consistency. Now, that at times might mean that you're going to need to back me up even though you don't completely agree and I might need to back you up but, we need to make sure that the message going out to learners is a consistent one. Now, if it's something on tactics for example, we can quite openly have a version 'A' and version 'B' because it's only my opinion and your opinion. If we share that with the group, it might stimulate healthy debate. What we have to avoid come the assessment is for people to have received mixed messages and then kick up a stink if they don't pass the course. If they complain that we've diverted from where we were meant to be then that isn't good. It just gives us that bit of security to fall back on and say, "no, these were the messages".

Others approached these interactions with instrumental and individualist attitudes, believing that collaboration, cooperation, and the nurturing of team bonds and solidarity were at odds with the fluid and changeable condition(s) of tutor teams (Goffman, 1959). For example, Mike said:

> The key thing is sorting who's doing what. I tend to only really focus on what I'm doing. As long as I know that you can crack on with your stuff. There's probably a better way to do it, but we're only part-time, if that. To be honest, it's just a quick and easy check-in beforehand. It's usually a 'I'll do that night and you do that night' or "you do that practical and I'll do the workshop" type of scenario. When I have had those conversations it has not been based on anything other than just splitting it up really. I will wait for that person to ask me for my thoughts or whatever.

Observations revealed that while TCSG artefacts were used as reference points for providing initial structure, teams employed a range of *primary* and *secondary adjustments* (Goffman, 1961). Here, teams devised improvised lines of action that variably complied with TCSG's policies to pragmatically translate prescribed content and produce desired outcomes. The below fieldnote depicts a scenario where William, Trevor, and Patrick modified the scheme of work in response to an emerging situation:

> Trevor insists, "it's not like we don't know the group now, is it? We agree that the in-situs were diabolical, shite. It told us a lot about where they are". William flicks through a folder containing a scheme of work, retorting "we don't have to deliver any of this the way it's written, there's no right way". Trevor suggests that, based on the in-situ exercise, that they swap the 'AM' and 'PM' activities, prioritising 'out of possession' content and tutor-led delivery, shifting the workshops so that 'messages' are more coherent. He argues, "the feedback is going to be fresh in their minds, let's get them out on the grass straight away and working on the things they need to. Pat, that means you'll deliver on Wednesday, I'll take this morning. The prep workshop we'll do before lunch and get them delivering afterwards". William and Patrick nod. William remarks, "I'm happy with that, let's try it".

All of the participants reported some agency in translating TCSG curricula, drawing on the team's expertise to adapt to learner needs, situations, and constraints (e.g. time). However, agency was not unfettered, with teams seeking to strike a balance between loyally implementing TCSG policy and providing a high-quality experience for coach learners as consumers. Parker highlighted the importance of being perceived to collectively "*beat TCSG's drum*" to avoid sanctions from national managers:

> Ultimately, we're employed to add value and bring TCSG's core messages to life through our own experiences. When we're planning, we're really conscious if we're moving stuff around of 'can we do this?', 'should we do this?' and if it's a "yes", then this's more important than 'can we do this?'. The big thing for us as a team is to figure out what works for them [the learners] but still deliver the outcomes in a consistent way. The last time I delivered was with [colleagues]. We saw on the first day that there was a gap in their knowledge and we swapped days two and three, shaving off some stuff we didn't think they needed. We took it in a different way. We gave more detail than TCSG really want and asked the learners to deliver differently. Granted, we didn't deliver everything in three hours, but we were confident that TCSG's message was the main one. It can't be 'Parker's team's' version because, and this is extreme, if someone comes to watch us, even with a justification, we wouldn't want them saying "you aren't hitting what you're supposed to. Fix it or you aren't tutoring anymore'. I don't mean we'd be throwing loads of rubbish in there. It'd be stuff roughly condoned by TCSG, but with a little bit of a twist.

Interview responses shed light on hidden collusive agreements and acts of *team collusion*, which involved the development of fabricated arguments and tactics for engaging disruptive, non-compliant or marginalised learners (Goffman, 1959). Fabrications of this sort – *strategic fabrications* – were constructed to minimise learner resistance and sustain direction towards schemes of work and workshop objectives, all of which were compounded by ongoing and shifting constraints. Following an observation of Dan and Logan's co-delivery, Callum pointed out a lack of balance in their introductory presentation on different practice design(s). Logan offered further insight:

> Constant practice is still commonplace for most of the level two group we have at the minute. The course is designed to take learners away from that type of stereotypical session plan and get them doing more game-based stuff. That's why we quickly run through the PowerPoint slides and resources at the start, checking the consistency of content that someone may've added, making sure everyone is one the same page with the variable and random messaging. There can't really be any grey areas. Of course there is a place for constant practice, we can recognise that, but that message isn't really for them, not at this level. If me, Dan and [colleague] are familiar, running off the same bullet points and going with the same message and core values, candidates will believe in the approach enough to listen and progress through the workshops. There's some box ticking and not a lot of time to get through it, and if one learner offers a counterargument FOR constant practice that goes unaddressed we run the risk of another, then another, which could cost us forty minutes trying to realign the room.

*Fabrications* extended to the manner of delivery and the agreed aura that teams wished to generate (Goffman, 1974). Matters related to the emergent character of co-delivery and ensuring sufficient structure and predictability for less well-versed *team-members* featured heavily in choices regarding delivery style (Goffman, 1959). The following fieldnote shows an exchange between Stuart and Patrick:

> Stuart suddenly brings the distribution of flipchart paper and pens to a halt. He turns to Patrick, "Pat, how do you want to deliver this?". Patrick responds, "I'm happy to do owt [anything], mate. What do you reckon?". Stuart replies, "I'm happy to work around you but I'm not a huge fan of the "I'll do the morning, you can do the afternoon" kind of thing. I don't think it maximises the value of actually co-delivering. Like, I might forget to say something at ten o'clock and you might not be on until one, then whatever you wanted to say about it is going to be irrelevant" [Patrick nods, sticking TCSG posters on the wall]. Patrick adds, "Hmm. Aye. To be honest I liked the rigid structure when I first started, like it was more concrete". Resuming their tasks, the exchange persists with a proposition from Stuart, "you're happy to just bounce off one another, then?" Patrick agrees, but appears cautious, "yeah, nee [no] bother, gives us more wiggle room in the long run".

In Goffman's (1959) terms, Patrick and Stuart believed that the conditions of their work rendered untenable a completely scripted performance due to the likelihood of an "event [that] breaks the [un]planned sequence of statements and acts" (p. 221). Beyond reparative functions, Stuart elaborated on the use of conversational delivery styles to convince learners of the authenticity of the team's performance, thus engendering trust and followership. Stuart, in his own words:

> I think it seems much more natural than the traditional robotic style of delivering courses where it's blatantly standardised. As soon as learners get a sniff of "they've done this a hundred times before" that connection with them goes away. The crux of it is that we want learners to feel they're getting a bespoke and personal experience and start to build that connection. We have to talk about things like [framework] but if we can somehow characterise it with our personality learners buy into the process and trust us a lot more.

These findings show that the participants' employment context and joint activities associated with team assembly, deployment and alignment building were shaped by neoliberal conditions that have frequently featured in the accounts of solitary coaches (e.g. Gale et al., 2019; Ives et al., 2021) and coach educators (e.g. Allanson et al., 2021; flexible contracts, limited access to resources, monitoring of work performances, decentralisation). Relatedly, unlike recent depictions of performance teams as collectives characterised by familiarity, trust, durability and mutuality (e.g. Britton et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2024), coach educators' joint preparations, or a lack thereof, reflect Hargreaves's (1994) writings on *contrived collegiality* (Goffman, 1959). Rather than an underbelly consisting of largely genuine collaboration, teamwork was reconstituted in mostly "administratively regulated" terms (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 208). As such, the composition of teams and collective labour were compulsory (i.e. mandated by TCSG), fixed in time and place (i.e. episodically and remotely "thrown together"), and implementation oriented (i.e. assembled for the purpose of policy translation; Hargreaves, 1994).

The regulated administration of teams, then, led to a situation consistent with Bauman's (2000) assertion that modernisation of organisations has caused workplace collaboration and relations to take on a pragmatic, transient and readymade form. The ties between *team-members* were weak and uncertain, fraught with tension via co-optation, only to be strengthened temporarily through team assembly and deployment (Crossley, 2011; Goffman, 1959). The version of performance teams presented here is one in which group life and activity were accomplished through temporary association indicative of a shift from "marriage to living together" (Bauman, 2000, p. 149; Goffman, 1959). The episodic and neoliberal essence of team administration restricted thoughtful team assembly that accounted for compatibility and limited any planning exchanges to mere short snatches "on the fly" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 201).

Speaking to Bauman's (2000) stance on the decomposition of human bonds, team administration, despite ambitions of collaboration, placed an increased responsibility on individuals to finesse and organise their own independent performances, limiting the type of rehearsals and staging activities undertaken by teams of sport coaches (e.g. Hall et al., 2024). Relatedly, team relations reflected those reported elsewhere (e.g. Gale et al., 2019; Potrac et al., 2012), albeit this study shows how differences were forged into cooperation that was less about the authentic pursuit of intersubjectivity and more "a fitting together of surface performances to create an aesthetic appearance" whose "formation collapses as soon as the music stops" (Scott, 2015, p. 231). What ensued was a bond of interdependence based on the pragmatic need for cooperation rather than deeply shared mutuality (Scott, 2015). Echoing the findings of others (e.g. Hall et al., 2024; Roderick & Allen-Collinson, 2020), the remote nature of work presented various issues, including the imposed blurring of *backstage* and *frontstage* spaces through and beyond the work setting (Goffman, 1959).

The intersection of these conditions was compounded by the function of teams as short-term and liquifiable organisational resources for purposes of implementation (Bauman, 2000). Like findings elsewhere (e.g. Britton et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2024), the participants collectively recognised the centrality of generating respect and trust in the accomplishment of work, but, in contrast, this study revealed how the impressionistic aspects of team assembly, deployment and alignment building were mutually constraining and solely undertaken for purposes of curricula translation within strict temporal and spatial boundaries. While some staging activities similar to Britton et al. (2025) and Hall et al. (2024) were found, participants approached such engagements and others with a different orientation, informed by neoliberal understandings of the work context (e.g. metrics). Even though the goal of team preparations was to develop *dramaturgical discipline, loyalty and circumspection*, the sub-par conditions rendered this activity pragmatic and instrumental, whereby a patchy intersubjectivity and basic functionality that lasted the short duration of the team's performance were sought (Goffman, 1959).

Indeed, the participants' collective staging techniques (e.g. assembly, deployment, alignment building) reflected their perceived role(s) in the business-related dealings of TCSG and also the many vulnerabilities that arose from contrivance and employment conditions (e.g. lack of training, limited preparation; Gale et al., 2019). Vulnerabilities presented risk(s) that the participants attempted to mitigate through a suite of unrealised collusive and fabricated dimensions and activities (Goffman, 1959, 1974). Contextual pressures and constraints encouraged a greater focus on deception, protecting the *secrets* and *face* of the team and elevating the status of individual *team-members* (Goffman, 1959; Hall et al., 2024). Building on studies that have highlighted the functional role of deception and use of independent but mutually enacted fabrications (e.g. Nelson et al., 2025; O'Gorman et al., 2021), our findings show how teams collusively constructed fabricated acts (e.g. arguments, roles) to create desirable impressions believed integral to the translation of curricula and (re)production of social order. Such pragmatism speaks to the situation of modern organisations, wherein group activities are rarely "treated with the kind of respect which realities command" (Bauman, 2000, p. 169).

Unlike the rigorous dialogue and scrutiny which characterised the team preparation of professional coaches (e.g. Britton et al., 2025; Hall et al, 2024), a shift away from durability meant collaboration was "reduced to congeniality" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 195). The participants, in most cases, were agreeable in the pursuit of collective objectives and efficient means of ensuring sufficient coordination. In many respects, the effective translation of policy was dependent on collective conformity, sacrifice and "simulated compliance with administrative demands" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 208). Such utilitarian perspectives dissuaded productive dialogue and conflict and encouraged a temporary disarming of relentless self-interest (Bauman, 2000). Like the findings of Gale et al. (2019), the participants recognised that work was achieved *through* others; in

this case independent in terms of performance but interdependent through collective evaluation (Crossley, 2011; Goffman, 1959). To an extent, *team-members* became consumables through which to realise self-serving shared interests (Bauman, 2000; Goffman, 1959). Thus, individual agency preceded compliance which, in turn, shed light on the way(s) *backstage* spaces and exchanges were not free from social dictate (Corsby et al., 2023; Goffman, 1959).

## Concluding thoughts

This paper sets a new agenda for the examination of collective impression management in contemporary sport organisations through the generation of fresh empirical and theoretical insights into the construction of impressionistic team performances. We have shown that choices and selected strategies regarding team assembly, organisation, and alignment building reflect the current disjointed condition of performance teams as both a neoliberal endeavour and resource. Our analysis illustrates that, while high-quality pedagogical practice is a priority, the pragmatic and mandate-driven collective pursuit of respect and followership is also a primary concern. Our findings shed new light on the dramaturgical mechanics (e.g. role distribution) employed by coach educators to instrumentally foster sufficient *dramaturgical discipline*, *loyalty* and *circumspection* for purposes of translating curricula (Goffman, 1959). Generated insights show that teams made do with unrehearsed, calculated and in-situ quick fixes, necessitated by limited opportunities for *back region* engagement, to establish vague direction, uniformity, deception, and collusive tactics (Goffman, 1959). Finally, the findings show how teams manage the boundaries of *front* and *back regions* to enable such deliberations (Goffman, 1959).

Consistent with our interpretivist position, we hold that our findings support *moderatum*, naturalistic, and analytical generalisations (Smith, 2018; Williams, 2000). Regarding *moderatum*, we believe that our findings are relevant for those who deploy, organise, and participate in teams in organisational contexts (e.g. sport coaching) that represent a "shared world of meaning" and depend on similar types of coordination and activity (Grills & Prus, 2019; Williams, 2000, p. 220). By invoking *naturalistic* generalisation, we invite readers to critically reflect on their own "personal engagement with life's affairs" in light of the data and theoretical interpretations provided (Smith, 2018, p. 140). We also believe that our research has *analytical* generalisability because, similar to others (e.g. Britton et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2024), our findings highlight the importance of strategic staging and prudence in the organisation and alignment of teams and demonstrate how political acumen is integral to the intentional collective activity of sport workers (Goffman, 1959).

Our suggestions for future inquiry are two-fold. First, researchers may wish to explore how teams of coach educators cooperate in sustaining *dramaturgical loyalty*, *discipline* and *circumspection* in their *front region* performances (e.g. when delivering workshops; Goffman, 1959; Potrac, 2019). Such investigations could attend to the in-situ strategies that are used by *team-members* to uniformly adapt and respond to emerging situations, as well as how they restore a team's image following a discrediting incident (Goffman, 1959). Second, our findings indicate that scholars should examine the problematic effects of *contrived collegiality* (e.g. ad-hoc, non-fixed deployment of teams) on relational harmony and collaborative attitudes (Bauman, 2000; Hargreaves, 1994). Researchers may seek to understand how temporarily "living together" with co-tutors shapes perceptions of (mis)trust and informs how coach educators and others independently interpret and participate strategically, with calculation, in seemingly collegial *back region* and *front region* acts (Bauman, 2000, p. 149; Goffman, 1959).

In keeping with calls to better prepare practitioners for the political, social and relational micro realities of work (e.g. Potrac et al., 2022), policy-makers and administrators should strive for a more enduring model of teamwork that promotes professional solidarity (Hargreaves, 1994). Based on our findings, we advise office holders to develop role preparation programmes and onboarding practices that prioritise the necessary intra- and interpersonal skills in response to the challenges and constraints outlined by the participants. We emphasise the importance of encouraging practitioners to relearn the art(s) of living together in the pursuit of legitimate jointly achieved action (Bauman, 2000). In doing so, preparation

programmes may include role-play or scenario training centred on controlled conflict and disagreement, focused debate, negotiation and finding common ground (Bauman, 2000).

We invite practitioners to consider how they might intentionally engage in preparatory deliberations amidst constraining conditions to develop intersubjectivity (e.g. questions asked; topics prioritised (Bauman, 2000).

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