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Hooked on coaching

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What is this about?

Coaching is widely used and recognised in Business as a driver for improved performance for some time now. Coaching has also been introduced to the Education sector and especially Further Education has embraced it through National Initiatives such as the Subject Learning Coaches Initiative of the Teaching and Learning Programme (Learning and Skills Network). However, while mentoring schemes are used and valued in Higher Education (HE), especially within PgCert Teaching and Learning programmes, Maddern (2010: 38) points out that coaching is not widely used in HE despite the fact that it has the potential to

‘be enormously beneficial in helping academics reconcile the often conflicting demands (of teaching, research and administration) they are faced with as well as optimising their performance, increasing productivity and helping them achieve their goals’.

What follows is a personal reflective review and an exploration into coaching and its relevance and usefulness for academic development activities. It has been written shortly after I completed postgraduate qualifications in this area at the University of Oxford Brookes in collaboration with the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and at the University of Wolverhampton and it provides an insight into how my thinking and practice has been influenced by coaching.

Beginnings...

The lights were out when my journey began. It was pitch black and I did not even know it... On my journey I travelled gradually from darkness to light and on the way things become clearer and started making sense. Soon I discovered the beauty and usefulness of coaching and developed a new passion but I guess I could not resist -being a person who loves to help others.

I was not alone on this journey. I travelled with interesting people, stopped at fascinating places and, through self-study, inner motivation and support from peers and facilitators, developed new and exciting skills. These are re-shaping me as a person, practitioner and coach and I feel the huge potential coaching has to make people feel valued, motivated and offer support to see them grow and fulfil their potential.

Discovery

For the very first time I discovered that we do indeed have two ears and just one mouth but still manage to talk more than listen. Whitmore (1993: 35) believes that perhaps the hardest thing a coach has to learn to do is to shut up! I agree. I had to **learn to listen**, to step back, give my ‘coachees’ space and time and let them discover things for themselves.

Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their performance as well as freeing and transforming real-self into ideal-self. Is this really possible? Yes, but we need others (Boyatzis et al., 2004). We need trusting relationships and the belief in our abilities.

Soon, I started looking for opportunities to **practise coaching**. Eva, a fictional name but a

real person, was my first ever case. I threw myself in at the deep end and learned from my own mistakes. I built bridges of communication, co-operation and trust, experimented a lot - even with e-coaching - but then again, this is me and how I learn. I enjoy immersing myself in what I love doing, and feel very strongly the need to try new things, reflect on how things, as they happen and after they have happened (Schön, 1987), interpret, evaluate and adjust and to try again to improve.

The **GROW model** provided a solid base for me the novice coach and was a good starting point to practise coaching. Despite its structure, (Goal, Reality, Options and Will) it is organic, informal, flexible and highly personalised. During my very first coaching session, I definitely had a 'wooden' approach and tried to apply the model rigidly according to the book. I soon realised that this was a super silly idea and that it would not work. The key, I know now, is to adapt during the actual conversation to recognise what is relevant, to be able to sense the dynamic of situations and emotions, and develop an open and trusting relationship, to empathise and raise **(self-) awareness and responsibility** through which commitment for change will increase.

Developing and fine-tuning inner- and outer-radars to detect and sense **what is happening inside and around me** and understanding people's hopes and fears, even if not expressed in words (Goleman, 1998) are extremely important in coaching and in every other human interaction and relationship. So could I really become a good coach? And how does a good coach look like? A coach definitely needs, in my opinion, a big portion of Emotional Intelligence (EI). EI is not just important for a coach. EI also appears to influence students' transition from school to higher education and their social integration as research by Engelberg & Sjoberg (2004), Qualter et al. (2009) and Parker et al. (2005) suggest and are in line with Tinto's model of student withdrawal (1993). And if this is the case, what does this mean for the wider academic community? Are there links between EI, performance and success? Key ingredients of EI are self-awareness, social awareness, but also self-management and relationship management (Goleman et al., 2003). Just having traces of the stuff is definitely not enough. The good news, however, is that it can be learned and we can get better at it. It all starts from within, how we feel about ourselves and how we interact with others. Having the capacity to communicate but also the ability to co-operate and **empathise** plays a vital role in all this (Goleman et al., 2003). I soon realised that I need much more than just self-awareness for cultivating relationships. I seriously believe that I had a big issue with **self-control** and relationship management, especially in conflict situations. When dealing with direct people, it was clear that I did not manage them effectively at all in the past. I was aware of their behaviour and did not like it -but probably did the same to others. This bruised relationships. I feel that I am changing and recognise the importance of stepping back and not doing the same to others as they do to me.

Reflecting was very much part of the whole learning process during my studies. I enjoyed sharing my reflections face-to-face and online with peers in a supportive learning community. I have to admit, reflecting was actually therapeutic and helped me to make sense of my thoughts and experiences (Moon, 2004) and develop strategies to act (Gibbs, 1988), but also to improve my coaching skills and engage in a dialogue with others about coaching and learning.

New beginnings...

I feel that I have learned and gained so much. Thanks to my own interest in coaching, tutors and peers, I developed valuable coaching skills which I use today in my role as an academic developer. Am I better equipped when assisting others to develop and grow?

Looking back, I can say that I am. Coaching has, somehow, at least a tiny bit, increased my emotional intelligence and is making me a better human being who is aware and responsible for her own actions and promotes these values in others on a personal and institutional level. Coaching has also changed the way I design, deliver sessions, provide feedback and generally support learners. Yes, I am hooked on coaching and am realising the huge potential it has for personal, professional and academic development. My big question now is, will my institution recognise the value of coaching in the context of academic development to enable individuals and teams to cope effectively with change, increase job satisfaction and motivation among academics and other professionals who support learning (Maddern, 2010)?

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