Editor’s Introduction

Welcome to the third issue of Philosophy of Coaching, the journal that brings a theoretically-grounded, historically-informed approach to the study of coaching and coach education.

For this issue, we partnered with the Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (GSAEC), an organization dedicated to strengthening the discipline and practice of coaching through quality graduate-level education and research. Four of the five papers included in this issue were presented in some form or other at the GSAEC conference, held in Toronto, Ontario, in June 2017. We are pleased to be bringing these papers to a wider audience and are grateful to Pauline Fatien Diochon and Linda Page of GSAEC for facilitating this partnership opportunity.

In line with the mission of GSAEC, the theme for this issue was Coach Education and Training, with the Call for Papers highlighting the following questions:

1. What do we mean by coach education? What do we mean by coach training? How are they different? How are they the same? How are they related?
2. What philosophies, paradigms, and approaches underlie coach education and training?
3. What are the current challenges and opportunities in coach education and training?
4. How has coach education and training evolved over the past 15 years? What factors or conditions have led to its evolution?
5. What gaps in education or in training need to be addressed to serve the future of coaching (as a field) over the next 10 years?
6. What is the future of coach education and training over the next 10 years? What factors or conditions contribute to its evolution?

The five articles and four book reviews in this issue address these questions, and more, in different ways.
Michelle Albaugh, Kimberly Scott and Amy Conn’s article, ‘An evaluation of digital portfolios in coach education: Developing reflective coach practitioners,’ identifies many of the advantages, as well as some of the challenges, of incorporating a reflective practice component in a graduate coaching program.

Tatiana Bachkirova, Peter Jackson, Judie Gannon, Ioanna Iordanou, and Adrian Myers, in their article, ‘Re-conceptualising coach education from the perspectives of pragmatism and constructivism,’ similarly focus on the need for more reflective practice in coach education, highlighting some of the challenges in aligning coach education with the core values and principles of coaching practice.

Laura Hauser’s article, ‘The science behind powerful questioning: A systemic framework for coach educators and practitioners,’ presents a conceptual tool for thinking about, teaching and practicing the core coaching competency of powerful questioning.

Ken Otter, in his article ‘Leadership Coaching 2.0: Improving the marriage between leadership and coaching,’ draws on his own experience as both a leadership educator and a leadership coach to make the argument that leadership coaching needs to be more informed by leadership theory, asking how this might best be achieved.

Natalie Cunningham, in her article ‘Coaching: Meaning-making process or goal-resolution process?’ seeks to resolve the apparent tension in the coaching literature between two different outcome orientations, meaning-making and goal realization, showing that, in practice, these outcomes are not as distinct as they appear, with one preceding the other.

The four book reviews – two for The SAGE Handbook of Coaching (Bachkirova et al., 2017), which we believed, given its length (750 pages) and depth (6 parts, 40 articles), deserved special treatment, and one each for Collaborating with the Enemy (Kahane, 2017), and The Leadership Gap (Daskal, 2017) – offer a partial snapshot of the current state of coaching theory and practice.

If you like what you read in these pages, we invite you to get involved in one or more of the following ways:
• Tell your colleagues about the journal. They can subscribe for free by visiting philosophyofcoaching.org/subscribe

• Offer your services as a peer reviewer for future issues of the journal

• Contribute an article to the next issue of the journal. The Call for Papers is on our website at philosophyofcoaching.org

• Suggest possible themes for future issues

You can always get in touch with me directly at julian@philosophyofcoaching.org.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the journal, and that the articles in this and future issues support you in becoming the best coach, coach educator and/or coach researcher you can be.

Julian Humphreys
Editor-in-Chief
Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal
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An Evaluation of Digital Portfolios in Coach Education: Developing Reflective Coach Practitioners

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Abstract

Although portfolios have not yet gained widespread use in the field of coach education, they hold considerable promise for the development of reflective coach practitioners. However, it is unclear under which conditions their use is most successful. The purpose of this article is to examine the use of digital portfolios in graduate coach education and to offer recommendations for the adoption of portfolios in developing reflective practice among students. Data from 28 qualitative interviews eliciting student reactions to digital portfolio assignments were content analyzed in a summative assessment of reflection and learning. Illustrative examples are presented. Key advantages identified include student reflection and synthesis of material across multiple courses, development of professional identity, unique learning and value derived from writing for an anticipated audience, and unanticipated personal and professional benefits that extended beyond the bounds of the classroom. The article concludes with implications for including digital portfolios in coaching curricula and developing reflective coach practitioners.

Keywords: reflection, reflective practitioner, coach education, digital portfolio, ePortfolio

Introduction

As with many other professions that require skilled practitioners to work with their subjects in highly interpersonal engagements (e.g., doctors and nurses with patients; teachers with students; consultants and lawyers with clients), coaching requires a commitment to ongoing development and reflection to achieve peak performance. Reflection is regularly mentioned among the
fundamental practices that coaches use with their clients, but - with a few exceptions - less often when it comes to educating, training, and developing coaches (Bachkirova, 2016; Cavanagh, 2006; Cavanagh & Spence, 2013; Kemp, 2008; McLean, 2012). Perhaps it goes without saying that coaches need to be reflective practitioners. And perhaps it is implied within lists of coaching competencies that active, critical reflective practice should be one hallmark of an effective and experienced coach.

Learning and reflection are essential elements of coaching - if not inherent in its definition (Cox, 2006; Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014; Flaherty, 2011). Reflection also is credited for its important role in helping coaches develop their ethical capabilities through critical self-evaluation of their values, assumptions, beliefs, and actions within the context of their political, social, and cultural backgrounds (Bachkirova, 2016; Iordanou & Williams, 2017). However, to be a reflective practitioner requires more than simply being thoughtful about your work. It requires both elevating and interweaving reflective practice (awareness, inquiry, discovery, meaning making) during and after client-facing work (Schön, 1983). This requires consistent skill-building and intentional, ongoing practice with reflective thinking.

Reflective practice typically is developed through writing exercises such as journaling or maintaining a diary, or, more commonly in the field of coaching, in writing notes or in conversation with a supervisor (Bachkirova, 2016; Hawkins, 2009). In teacher education, portfolios have been used for decades as a tool to facilitate both reflective practice and assessment (Butler, 2006). One valuable byproduct of portfolio use has been the encouragement of learners in this context to take more responsibility for their own learning (Butler, 2006). Although portfolios have not yet gained widespread use in the field of coach education, they hold considerable promise for the development of reflective coach practitioners. Furthermore, with the digital economy transforming the nature of business interactions and employment relationships (Anderson & Wladawsky-Berger, 2016), digital portfolios in particular offer

1 For sample competencies, see for example websites from these coach credentialing organizations: International Association of Coaching (https://certifiedcoach.org/certification-and-development/the-coaching-masteries/), Center for Credentialing and Education (http://www.cce-global.org/Credentialing/BCC), Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (https://www.wabccoaches.com/includes/popups/competencies.html), Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (Vandaveer, Lowman, Pearlman, & Brannick, 2016), and the International Coach Federation (https://www.coachfederation.org/credential/).
opportunities for coach education to develop reflective practitioners who can thrive in the dynamic, customer-focused, collaborative, innovation-driven environments in which many of their clients now work and live.

**Reflection and reflective practice**

Reflection is foundational to how coaches work with clients but is less often the focus for their own growth and development (Cavanagh, 2006; Cavanagh & Spence, 2013; Kemp, 2008; McLean, 2012). Reflection is a rigorous meaning-making process that serves as a tool to integrate and transform knowledge and experience (Rodgers, 2002a). In this way, it exhibits certain parallels with coaching processes. Reflection is an “iterative, forward-moving spiral from practice to theory and theory to practice” (p. 863). Schön (1983) suggests this sort of rigorous, individual reflective experimentation is vital to develop a form of professional practice that remains effective in an increasingly VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world, where no standard, technical solutions exist. In *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön (1983) describes 2 types of reflection: (1) **reflection-on-action**, which takes place after the fact and informs how practice can be developed or changed after the event; and (2) **reflection-in-action**, which takes place in the moment and informs how shifts in practice can yet influence the event.

Schön (1983) argues that, through reflection, practitioners “can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience” (p. 61). As students of coaching allow themselves to experience the surprise and discomfort of learning and implementing new theories and methods of coaching, this sort of reflective practice is useful to integrate current learning and build increasing capacity to challenge assumptions and apply previous learning to novel or ill-formed challenges for themselves and their future clients. Next, we discuss how digital portfolios might play a role in developing reflective practice.

**Digital portfolios**

A digital portfolio, sometimes referred to as an ePortfolio, is a collection of evidence to show what a person has learned over time and to demonstrate their abilities (Barrett, 2007; Butler, 2006). Although digital portfolios are a pragmatic mechanism for storing visual and auditory content (Abrami &
Barrett, 2005), they are also meant to be “generative, reflective and indicative of one's technological competencies” (Hicks et al., 2007, p. 457).

**Why use digital portfolios**

In recent decades, the use of portfolios has become widespread in higher education (Clark & Eynon, 2009). They appeal to educators in part because they can be used to facilitate assessment (e.g., documenting attainment of a standard), scaffold deep learning, and demonstrate professional competence (Barrett, 2005, 2007; Orland-Barak, 2005). For example, digital portfolios can quickly give a potential employer a broad view of both achievements and thinking, thereby providing an immediate ‘whole person view’ of potential candidates (Burksaitiene, Tereseviciene, & Kaminskie, 2011). As such, they can become learning artifacts for students that have value beyond the completion of a class assignment.

The “digital” aspect of digital portfolios cannot be overstated. First, digital portfolios may help students develop the competencies and confidence necessary to engage in technology-assisted coaching. Second, they can facilitate learning and development using technology-based coaching tools. Third, educators are increasingly urged to prepare students for the digital environments in which they will live and work (21st Century Learning Reference Group, 2014; Arquero & Romero-Frias, 2013; Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Mcloughlin & Lee, 2010; U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology, 2010). The field of coaching is not immune from these changes in our society, and they directly impact how coaches interact with their clients. Some reports estimate that technology-assisted coaching now accounts for 50-60% of coaching delivered (Kanatouri & Geibler, 2017). There are many technology-assisted options available for engaging in coaching, including via telephone, webcam, email, video, text and mobile app. Not only must coaches be adept at using the communication and collaboration technologies preferred by their clients, they also should be capable of contributing to online communities of practice in coaching. As such, the fourth reason why digital portfolios are important is that they ideally teach coaches how to use the digital portfolio platform to become skilled at adding their authentic voices to technology-mediated discussions about the practice of coaching, in service of nurturing, guiding, and maturing this emerging field of professional coaching.
How digital portfolios facilitate learning

From a learning and design perspective, learning portfolios traditionally included five steps: Collecting, Selecting, Reflecting, Projecting, and Celebrating (Barrett & Wilkerson, 2004). Technology affords at least five additional opportunities: “Archiving, Linking/Thinking, Storytelling, Planning, Publishing” (Barrett & Wilkerson, 2004). When used in a formal education program these steps can unfold over short or long durations and be used for one class or to support learning across an entire program’s curriculum. For example, in a single coach training class, the instructor can set up a portfolio structure that encompasses topics mapped to individual course learning objectives. Students can use their portfolios to build digital artifacts that are refined throughout the course. For example, when educating coaches, these digital artifacts might include a list of coaching resources, an executive summary of an academic article, a book critique, critical reflection about a coaching framework, or a case study of a challenging client engagement.

Students collect and curate the content to include in their portfolios, and then they reflect on the content they created. The final portfolio may be the object of a reflection paper; alternatively, students can submit reflections about each artifact as it is being constructed. Digital portfolios can be easily shared with classmates, and on some technology platforms they can be made publicly available. As a culminating project of a class or program, the successful completion of digital portfolios can be celebrated and promoted as one indication of proficiency.

Reflection is a fundamental learning skill that is considered to be an essential process underlying the effective construction of digital portfolios (Scott, 2010; Yancey, 2009). Digital portfolios not only provide a holding place for reflective writing, but they also enhance reflection and self-regulation by making it easy for students to return to their selected artifacts and modify their thoughts or goals (Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Scott, 2010). Portfolios also support self-directed learning skills, including goal-setting, task-analysis, plan implementation, and self-evaluation (Beckers, Dolmans, & van Merrienboer, 2016; Scott, 2010). However, it is unclear under which conditions their use is most successful or whether there are individual differences that impact their utility. For example, Cheng and Chau (2013) found a connection between goal

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2 The authors’ comments here integrate their experience using digital portfolios in a graduate-level coaching certificate program.
orientation and digital portfolio development, suggesting that students with a blend of mastery and performance orientations are more persistent and reflective in their work than students with a single goal orientation. Furthermore, one investigation into the quality of reflective content in educator portfolios found a predominance of technical or descriptive reflection rather than the sort of critical reflection required to be a reflective practitioner (Orland-Barak, 2005). This research suggests that there is potential for portfolios to support the development of reflective practitioners, but the desired learning outcomes may not be achieved simply by requiring their use.

**Theoretical frameworks underlying digital portfolios**

The emphasis on self-directed learning and reflection processes during digital portfolio construction leads us to consider the theoretical grounding for their application to coach education. Constructivist learning theory and social constructivism provide underlying principles upon which digital portfolio implementations may be built.

**Constructivist learning theory**

From a constructivist perspective, learning is an active process that requires learners to engage in sense making to organize and construct their knowledge (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Mayer, 2004). Students construct their knowledge by reflecting and building upon their current experiences and prior knowledge, rather than knowledge being acquired through “traditional” mechanisms of observation, repetition and memorization. Social constructivism further elevates the importance of collaboration within a social context to build knowledge. It is centered around the idea that our sense of self and our social realities are created through verbal and nonverbal interactions with others, as well as how we make sense of those interactions (Cunliffe, 2004).

Facilitating the construction of knowledge requires creating learning environments where students can experience authentic and meaningful tasks that allow them to engage in thoughtful reflection on their experiences and make connections to new content (Jonassen, 1999; Land, Hannafin, & Oliver, 2012). This begins by establishing a problem, question, or project that is the focus of the learning experience and constitutes the learning goal for students (Jonassen, 1999). When using digital portfolios, the purpose and audience for the portfolio are established first, along with question prompts or guidelines for portfolio content based on the learning objectives. Resources, tools, scaffolding,
and support systems, including communities of learners and coaches/facilitators, are provided to help students complete the project, with the underlying premise that students learn the content to complete the project rather than completing the project to apply what was learned (Barab & Duffy, 2012; Jonassen, 1999). Providing students with opportunities to collaborate, share their digital portfolios, and exchange feedback expands the potential for reflection and meaningful learning.

The coaching and facilitation provided in these learning environments is intended to motivate learners, monitor their progress, offer feedback and advice, and encourage reflection about what is being learned by asking provoking questions (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2008; Jonassen, 1999). Reflection in this context follows Dewey’s definition of reflective thinking, which emphasizes the systematic, rigorous and disciplined process of meaning making from experience (Rodgers, 2002a). This type of reflection, most effective when it happens with others, follows a cycle of being present during the experience, describing the experience without interpretation, analyzing the experience from multiple perspectives, and then experimenting with new actions in the next experience (Rodgers, 2002b).

Following from these principles are several student-centered teaching methods, such as problem-based learning and collaborative learning, which give students an active role in making decisions about and pursuing their learning, with the goal of facilitating more meaningful, deep levels of learning (Land et al., 2012). Reviews of the literature suggest that student-centered learning environments are complex, with both student characteristics (e.g., personality, age, motivation, self-confidence, self-efficacy) and contextual factors (e.g., appropriateness of the workload, information, teacher quality, clarity of goals and standards, etc.) affecting the depth of learning achieved (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010). As a learning tool typically embedded in a student-centered environment, digital portfolios are subject to many of these same factors that may encourage or discourage more meaningful levels of learning. The purpose of this study, then, was to examine the use of digital portfolios in graduate coach education and to offer recommendations for the adoption of portfolios in developing reflective practice among students. The questions that guided the evaluation included the following: (1) Did the digital portfolio assignments successfully facilitate student reflection and learning? (2) What can student accounts of their experience with the digital portfolio assignments tell us about the conditions under which their use is most successful?
Method

Program background: Digital portfolios in the context of a graduate-level coach education program

The coach education and training program examined in this study is situated within the Northwestern University Master of Science in Learning and Organizational Change (MSLOC) program, which offers a graduate-level Organizational and Leadership Coaching Certification (OLCC). The MSLOC program offers both traditional evening format courses and hybrid learning courses that combine both face-to-face and technology-mediated instruction. The OLCC program participants are distributed across the United States, but it is not an “online program.” Participants meet in person for some of the classes during the year-long program. One distinguishing feature of MSLOC is its commitment to building digital literacy, the knowledge and skills that help students become competent learners, participants, and contributors to digitally-enabled environments. The hybrid learning environment and program resources available to foster digital literacy provide a supportive context for the use of digital portfolios.

The OLCC program educates both experienced and new coaches. On average, students have 14 years of work experience when they apply to the program. Students begin OLCC with a self-assessment. Students use the information from the self-assessment to create individual learning plans that help them identify and focus on specific needs for their development as a coach. At the same time, all participants begin work on their digital portfolios. The digital portfolio platform and structure are provided by the program. Completed portfolios are required to contain five sections: 1) a brief personal introduction that highlights what makes the coach unique, 2) an autobiographical account of the coach’s professional background and a corresponding narrative that answers “who I am,” 3) a summary of the coaching resources and tools that the student selects to demonstrate her/his knowledge and approach to coaching, 4) a coaching philosophy or mission statement, which should provide an authentic point of view about coaching, and 5) testimonials or summaries of feedback the coach receives from clients coached during the program. Students share

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3 The first author is a full-time faculty member in MSLOC and oversees the OLCC Program; the second author is the MSLOC Program Director; and the third is a current graduate student who was a graduate assistant and not involved in the coaching certification at the time these data were collected.
reflections about their portfolio contents and receive both instructor and peer feedback throughout the year.

Digital portfolios serve three purposes within the OLCC program. First, they provide scaffolding for self-directed learning and reflection throughout the duration of the one-year program, as a co-curricular addition to standard coursework. Each section of the portfolio requires students to review course content and then select and summarize how they might use that content in their coaching practice. Because the eventual target audience for the portfolios are potential clients, students need to engage in meaning making to integrate what they have learned and write about it using conversational, jargon-free language. Second, portfolios allow for an assessment of student learning. A coaching supervisor grades the final portfolio using a rubric that aligns with the program’s learning objectives. Portfolios are graded for: 1) the depth of thought about the coaching models, frameworks and tools introduced in the program, 2) critical thinking about course content, 3) appropriate application of content to coaching scenarios, and 4) coherence, accuracy and clarity of writing. Third, the final portfolios may be made publicly available for students to showcase their work to prospective clients. Students can leverage part or all of their portfolios to construct websites or publish their work.

The OLCC program began using digital portfolios in 2015. The assignments and structure of the portfolios have been adjusted over time in response to instructor and student feedback. Two technology platforms also have been tested, Pathbrite and Wordpres. Following the second full year of using digital portfolios, the program initiated a study to investigate their usefulness in coach development. Forty-seven students from two OLCC cohorts were invited to participate in this research, described below.

**Sample & Procedures**

The full sample included 34 alumni (72% of alumni from the 2 most recent cohorts) of the graduate certificate program in Organizational and Leadership Coaching (OLCC), situated within Northwestern University’s Master’s program in Learning and Organizational Change (MSLOC). Participants completed an assortment of quantitative surveys. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed more extensively about their experiences creating digital portfolio assignments while in the coaching certificate program. Twenty-eight (N=28) of these alumni agreed to be interviewed, and they constitute the sample used in the present study. Study participants were given the choice of a $10 Amazon or Starbucks
gift card for completing the quantitative portion of the study and an additional $10 gift card after completing the interview.

All interviews were conducted by the third author, either face-to-face (recorded using an iPhone voice recording app) or using the Bluejeans videoconferencing platform (which has built-in recording capability), and were then professionally transcribed. The transcripts from these interviews were uploaded into NVivo 11 for Windows and coded inductively using this software, using a directed content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The interviews were roughly one hour and included several topic areas as they related to the digital portfolio assignments in OLCC: Overall experience, critical/evaluative comments, narrative questions, and concluding questions. The four questions from the critical/evaluative area were examined for the current study. Appendix A lists the four specific questions used.

The mean age of the interview sample was 39 (Range: 27-59), and the mean years’ work experience before applying to the program was 14 (Range: 5-35). Thirteen participants indicated they had no coaching experience before beginning the certificate program, and 15 participants indicated they had served in a part-time, internal or informal coaching role within their organization. None of the participants who consented to be interviewed indicated they held a formal coaching role for their job.

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of digital portfolios in graduate coach education and to offer recommendations for the adoption of portfolios in developing reflective practice among students. Schön’s (1983) Reflective Practitioner model informed the content analysis and helped cast a wide net to understand reflective practice in developing coaches. The specific content sought in the analyses included the full range of reflective practice identified by Schön (1983): awareness, inquiry, discovery, and meaning making.

In addition to using the digital portfolio assignments to engage in reflective practice, students were also encouraged to anticipate using the material at some point for marketing and personal brand development, as well as to develop digital literacy. Evidence of the relevance of these purposes emerged in student interviews and is also reported below.
Findings

Table 1 displays the total number of participants who used reflective language in their interview responses (see Appendix A for question wording). Twenty-two study participants (nearly 80%) reported a positive shift, advancement, or improvement in their thinking that was reflective in nature. Fourteen described an aspect of coach identity development, and 13 reflected on the effect of writing their reflective exercises with a current or future audience in mind. Separate from reflection, 18 participants focused on the digital portfolio as a tool to create marketing materials. Three focused on improvements in their digital skills, and four said the assignments did not add significant value to their learning or professional development. The remainder of this section illustrates student thinking and experiences behind these frequencies, through verbatim quotes that are at once representative of overall responses in a particular category and especially easy to grasp.

Table 1: Number of study participants coded for each theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Count (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall reflection</td>
<td>22 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection and identity</td>
<td>14 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection and audience</td>
<td>13 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>18 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other learning: Digital literacy</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No use</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 28

Note. Each participant’s response was read for any or all of these themes. As a result, counts add up to more than 28, and percent adds up to more than 100%.

Overall reflection

When asked, “Did your work to create your portfolio impact your thinking about coaching? Either yourself as a coach or the field of coaching in general,” Participant #4 said this:

I think it was much more like a space to put some ideas together and to reflect and define my identity as a coach. It's much more like a summary of all ideas I have gained through all the other courses and with the other assignments. We read a little of authors, theory… and we practiced a lot, so this was the opportunity to put them all together and share them…. We had done a lot of reflection before, so this was more an opportunity to put all those things together.
This participant recognized that reflection was inherent in many courses in the certificate program but suggested that the digital portfolio activities in particular helped her to synthesize the material across courses, “to put all those things together.” Participant #25 took the idea of synthesizing across courses further and developed her unique point of view:

One thing that I really remember doing is looking at all my notes on the class lectures and articles and book chapters that we had read… When I pulled all the pieces out, then I looked through it and figured out what was a consistent thread throughout and how to articulate those in my portfolio…. There's so many approaches and theories and lenses through which to view coaching that we learned about…. The portfolio was an opportunity for me to be like, now, what's my approach? What does this say for me? I really felt a -- not a pressure, but I felt a responsibility to represent my own take on coaching and not just regurgitate what we had learned.

Similarly, when asked how the digital portfolio shaped her learning, Participant #23 responded, “I mean, I keep coming back to the way that it just forced me to develop a point of view as a coach.”

Similar to many others, Participant #17 identified synthesis as a key influence of the digital portfolio assignments on her thinking and learning about coaching, but she added her perception of the influence of writing for a particular audience. Her response to the question regarding impact of her portfolio work on her thinking about coaching:

I think the fact that I needed to cull from different areas and synthesize that and then at the end of the day, get that out for somebody else to consume and, in a sense, to evaluate or judge. And I think that makes you more critical of what you're going to be putting on the page. And I think in a different way than just writing a paper and turning it in.

The benefits of this digital portfolio setting for reflection also extended beyond reflective thinking to reflection regarding her practice:

I think there's a different type of self-imposed pressure or expectation when you're writing something that's going to be viewed by other people when you're describing yourself. For me, it forced me to think a little bit more deeply about not so much which is the model I really agree with, but which of those could I see myself realistically using.

It was not unusual for participants to report benefits of reflection in the portfolio that extended beyond the classroom. Participant #35 experienced a
career-altering result of the digital portfolio assignments, where thinking through the portfolio assignments helped her gain clarity on her career:

I will say it while I'm talking about the fact that I don't think that the tool itself [the Digital Portfolio] had a huge impact, I actually do think the process of thinking about creating a digital portfolio contributed to my decision to actually shift my career focus. It made me realize that – and I actually didn't go into the OLCC Program intending to leave my job or to launch a career in coaching; but that is, in fact, now what I'm doing.

Reflection and identity

As stated earlier, it was not unusual for participants to report benefits of reflection in the portfolio that extended beyond the classroom. Participant #25 offered this example of how her learning transferred from her professional identity to her personal identity. How the digital portfolio assignments shaped her learning, “Frankly, once I started working on them, I was like this is my philosophy in life not just in coaching.” This view of how the portfolio experience brought unity between a sense of self in coaching and a sense of self as a whole was somewhat extreme.

More commonly, alumni reported developing a response to the identity challenges of discovering who they are as a coach as they developed their own, authentic point of view in the portfolio. Participant #20, for example, reported discovering her niche as a coach:

I pulled in two different pages; one of me as an individual leadership coach and the one as an organizational leadership coach. So it helped me make that distinction…. I've always seen myself as more of an OD consultant, but through the digital portfolio process, I kind of now have reframed it into [being] more of an organizational learning coach, and I like that terminology better. For me, there is a difference. So I feel like there was a small reframe, but a powerful one for me and that was only through the process of the portfolio. I found that language when I was doing my portfolio.

4 Participant #25’s coaching philosophy in her digital portfolio included elaborations on these coaching principles: People are whole and unique and deserving of empathy; awareness and insight precede change; habitual thoughts shape reality; and we don’t have to stay stuck - we have choice in how we respond to life.
Reflection and audience

Returning to Participant #17, this former student proposed that publishing these assignments on-line for an audience pushed her to think and synthesize in ways that were different than her experience with the reflective assignments that were confined to one particular course. Others used reflection to better understand their audience. Participant #7, for example,

So it very much helped me get clarity around the populations I wanted to access and then how to message to them. And it prompted me to do a lot of research on, like, how do other coaches talk about what they do and be clear on, you know, how do I describe coaching and what's important in that? That's a long way of saying, yes, it did influence my thinking.

Marketing

Participant #48 offered a combination of reflection, identity development and professional branding:

I don't think that I would have the perspective I have as a coach if I had not done that portfolio. Hands down. It was this question of... I had to ask myself the question of, at the core, when I think of who I am as a coach, 'What is the purpose of coaching?' and that's where I got to this like 'unlocking potential'. That right there -- that brand question and that reflection question mattered 100 percent... So like the whole process of forcing me to reflect on this, forced me then to actually integrate it because I'm writing this -- integrating it -- into my own approach to coaching.

Not all participants saw this deep connection between the digital portfolio assignments and their learning and development as a coach. Some saw the value of the portfolio assignments as a tool for marketing themselves as a coach. Some saw the value of the portfolio assignments as a tool for marketing themselves as a coach. Participant #34 for example,

Like I said, I'm still using some of the same content, because I'm still evolving my coaching message. For me, it was a -- how do I say it? I think the challenge with the portfolio -- is it a tool or is it a deliverable? I used it as a tool to help me refine my message and get my thought processes clean.

Participant #46’s response illustrates this utility even more plainly:

Only about how to market it. Not about what I actually do as a coach. I mean, that's helpful because you have to come up with a concise story, you have to come up with a tagline, you have to start thinking about things like that. What am I going to put above the fold? What do I want
people to be able to access, but not see right off the bat. Things like that.
(Interviewer: So it's mostly about marketing yourself as a coach?) Yeah.

Similarly, Participants #4 and #15 (respectively) give voice to this perspective, “I think I learned the importance of having one of these tools to sell yourself, like as a marketing piece,” and “It helped me learn a little bit more about how I would position myself as an external coach. But I’m not an external coach, and I don’t plan on being one.”

No Use

As intimated in that last quote, not all students experienced the digital portfolio assignments positively. In fact, four of the participants expressed they did not see where the digital portfolio provided any value at all. When asked if their work to create their digital portfolio had any impact on their thinking about coaching, Participant #45, for example, said simply, “No.” When probed for why not, she responded that it was not a good use of her precious learning time:

That was really not my intent. I didn't come through the program to be a coach. It was more to acquire coaching skills... The [digital portfolio] website was an afterthought for that... Like most MSLOC students, I have a work life. I have a family life. I have a school life and if anything, it wasn't the best use of my school life time. So it came at the expense of optional readings or whatever it was. So that time came out of my school time that I could have been using to do something else that would have greater value to me moving forward.

Participant #15 also expressed this sentiment,

I mean, yes and no. I have to be honest, I got more out of conversations with my peers and other people in the cohort about coaching styles and in my coaching circles and coaching groups. I learned more about myself as a coach in those and actually as a coach than I did in creating a portfolio... It just felt - it felt really forced to me. So I don't know if I took it as seriously as some other people.

And #36, “Well, for me it just seemed like more of an assignment and it was something I had to do.”

Other learning: Digital literacy

Only three participants spoke directly about the digital aspects of their learning. When answering the question of how the digital portfolio influenced
learning, Participant #4 indicated an ordering to her learning, “I learned digital skills first.” Participant #15 responded similarly to that question by indicating that she learned to use a particular digital tool, WordPress. Finally, Participant #38 indicated gaining a new level of comfort and understanding using the WordPress tool that would result in an increased independence in how they present themselves online.

Implications for coach education programs

For most students in this study, creating a digital portfolio provided opportunities to extend their learning and development as coaches beyond the achievement of individual course learning objectives. They used the digital portfolio assignments to synthesize coaching experiences, key concepts, and coaching models across courses to develop their unique, authentic identity and point of view. Coaches early in the process of establishing their independent practices also found value in creating content they could use for marketing purposes. One implication of this study is that it is critical to clearly state the program objectives for using digital portfolios and to revisit those objectives with students on multiple occasions. In coach education programs that develop both internal and external coaches, the learning value of portfolios, aside from their marketing potential, is an important point to reinforce. The obvious benefit of creating artifacts for public showcase can sometimes overshadow the benefits of reflective practice, as was seen in some of the student responses. Some students will need supplemental assistance to make connections between their portfolio artifacts and the reflective practice we see as essential to becoming an effective and experienced coach. Adopting the reflective practitioner framework in coach education, through scaffolding reflective practice via digital portfolio assignments, is one way to help students grasp the importance of reflective practice in the ongoing journey of coach development.

A second implication is that the students’ process of articulating and refining a coaching perspective for external audiences (potential clients, colleagues, or the public) should not be underestimated - both in terms of its impact on the depth of learning and the support required from instructors. Several participants acknowledged how having an external audience changed the way they processed the program material. One participant described it as a self-imposed pressure, “that makes you more critical of what you’re going to be putting on the page... and I think in a different way than just writing a paper and turning it in.” Another student put it this way, “I really felt a – not a pressure, but I felt a responsibility to represent my own take on coaching and not just regurgitate what we had learned.” Creating portfolios can require
students to synthesize their coaching experiences and course content in ways that help them find their authentic voices about the field of coaching. Several students in this study appear to have achieved deeper learning as a result. Developing a solid internal foundation for coaching, based on a self-realized coaching philosophy, then allows for an authentic expression of knowledge (Bachkirova, 2016; Baxter Magolda, 2009).

Third, the time and effort required for reflective practice should be factored into curriculum design. Students often were challenged by the time commitment and iterative nature of the process, which at times was frustrating to them - particularly early on in the process when it was less clear to them the value of going through this reflective process. Creating an orientation or introductory workshop for building portfolios can help set the stage, but to reiterate our earlier point, program administrators should revisit portfolio objectives regularly to encourage students and help them make connections. Consistent, repetitive messaging and framing is very important.

Furthermore, the instructional timeline within the program may need to shift to allow students more time for reflective thought, feedback, and iteration. Although many assignments and activities compete for valuable and limited space within each course design, peer feedback often was energizing for students and a catalyst for reflection. Orland-Barek (2005), for example, found that a collaborative process and a space for public reflection during portfolio construction resulted in higher levels of reflective thinking, when supported by “an infrastructure of engagement, mutuality, and continuity” (p. 40). Feedback also can help students overcome barriers, such as balancing the various purposes of the portfolio. Though requiring peer feedback adds another element to the design, it provides students more opportunities to gain awareness, challenge their assumptions, and test how well they are articulating their thinking. Establishing a rubric can help set expectations and provide guidelines for peer feedback.

Finally, working with technology can be a challenge for some. Dedicated technical support and resources for students who need additional help are necessary for effective digital portfolio implementation. The key is keeping the technology from discouraging students or interfering with the reflective process. An important instructional design step is selecting a digital portfolio platform that aligns with the vision students may have for a final product. Some platforms are more oriented toward sharing images, while others are structured similar to websites. Because some coaches may want to use the digital portfolio beyond the educational program, it is beneficial to provide templates and
platforms that allow them to easily make their work available for public viewing in the format they are most likely to use professionally. Students also will be more motivated to learn the technology if they see its applicability to other aspects of their professional work.

Conclusion

Reflection is a staple of coaching. It is surprising to us that reflective practice is not equally prominent and widespread in the education of coaches. The skill of facilitating client reflection is a competency all coaches should master, so it seems a natural extension for coaches to be skillful reflective practitioners as well. However, achieving this marker of coaching excellence requires disciplined practice in connection with others. This article explained how digital portfolios can be used to develop reflective practice, and we shared results of a summative design research study that examines student experiences with portfolios. Our findings suggest that using digital portfolios in coach education can promote deep learning. Creating portfolios with an external audience in mind provides the benefits of synthesizing program content, fostering professional identity development, and, for some, crafting artifacts that offer a showcase of expertise for potential clients. Digital portfolio construction requires the same ingredients as reflective practice - awareness, inquiry, discovery, and meaning making. With proper design and scaffolding, portfolios too may become a potent feature of coach education.

References


**Appendix A**

*Interview questions included in the current study.*

- Q4: Did your work to create your digital portfolio have any impact on your thinking about coaching (both for yourself as a coach and regarding the field of coaching)?
  - a. If yes, how? Why?
  - b. If not, why not?
  - c. Make sure respondent responds to both:
    - i. regarding **youself as a coach**
    - ii. regarding the **field of coaching**

- Q5: What was the most challenging part of creating the portfolio?

- Q6: What did you learn? (OR How did it shape or influence your learning?)

- Q7: What does your portfolio say about you as a coach? As an individual?

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Re-Conceptualising Coach Education from the Perspectives of Pragmatism and Constructivism

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a coherent philosophical position to underpin the task of the education of coaches. Our argument builds from an analysis of the specificity and issues concerning the development of coaches. We provide a potential explanation of these issues by identifying a significant discrepancy between two typical conceptualisations of coaching that in turn leads to differences in the principles of training, education and validation of coaching expertise. In contrast to a dominant modernist view, we argue for a conceptualisation that is based on the perspectives of pragmatism and constructivism that, in our view, better aligns with the fundamental attributes of professionalism as well as the way coaches see themselves. We describe how elements reflecting this position are operationalized in the educational programmes that we offer, together with a discussion of the consequences of applying these principles and implications for coaching stakeholders.

Keywords: coaching, education and development of coaches, pragmatism, constructivism, developmentalism
Background and the issues of developing coaching practitioners

To appreciate the challenges of coach education it is important to acknowledge that coaching is different in important ways from other practices, disciplines, and professions. Becoming a coach seems to be an endeavour typically undertaken later in life, when one has already been trained/educated in a different field. Although some similar disciplines, such as youth and widening participation mentoring or sports coaching might attract younger learners, for the majority of professional and life coaches, coaching is a second career. A comprehensive survey (428 participants) by Bono et al (2009) shows the average age of coaches as 48.43 with years coaching 9.5. Over the last few decades, the rapid growth in the practice of coaching has seen a multitude of coaches entering the field from a variety of backgrounds, including business, human resource management, education, psychology, counselling and psychotherapy (Bluckert, 2004; Bachkirova et al., 2014). The demographic of largely mature learners brings with it pluses and minuses; on the one hand there may be focus, determination, commitment to lifelong learning, and desire for a ‘second’ bite of the education and development ‘cherry’; on the other, practitioners may bring more entrenched views and practices of the way humans interact and function in the world.

The current literature on coaching education suggests that the growth of coaching has been in part facilitated by a simultaneous expansion in coach education offered by higher education institutions, training companies and professional bodies (Lane, 2017; Gray, et al, 2016; Gray, 2011). In the UK and North America, the upturn of provision of coach educational programmes, predominantly at postgraduate level, have been identified by a variety of sources (Fillery-Travis & Collins, 2017; Gray, et al, 2016; Stein et al, 2014; Western, 2012; Drake, 2008). Both the number of postgraduate courses in coaching in the UK and the number of institutions offering continuing education in coaching in the USA have reached triple figures (Fillery-Travis & Collins, 2017). Private providers also offer training and education in this market, many of which are affiliated to associations and/or educational institutions. A brief overview such as this, however, obscures significant differences in the premises underpinning learning and development, and a systematic evaluation of the coaching educational provision is somewhat overdue.

In this introduction, we discuss a number of issues associated with the education of coaches. Some of them are useful to consider in comparison to
other complex professions, others could be seen as unique to coaching because of the way it is conceptualised.

**Differences in the ‘rites of passage’**

To start our analysis, we note that the ‘rite of passage’ to coaching practice does not follow a pattern apparent in other established ‘liberal’ professions, where an initial academic qualification is a clear pre-requisite to becoming, say, a doctor, lawyer or engineer. It is interesting therefore, to compare coaching with other similar fields of practice, such as consulting, counselling and mentoring. In management consulting, for example, expertise and experience feature widely with little formal professional education (Greiner & Ennsfellner, 2010; Visscher, 2006), aside from a very few educational programmes beyond the ubiquitous MBA. Training in consultancy tends to focus on specific areas, techniques or models rather than critical evaluation of existing approaches, models and practices. The opposite is evident in counselling and psychotherapy, where tight regulation of educational courses at all levels exists and accreditation and continuing professional development (CPD) are mandatory (e.g. Bond, 2015).

A rapid growth in the demand for coaching has led to an equally rapid growth in short courses with varying credentialing opportunities (Fillery-Travis & Collins, 2017; Lane, 2017; Stein et al., 2014). Given the attractiveness of this relatively simple access to practice, the academic route to study coaching, although available, is not necessarily pursued by all. At the same time, various professional bodies offer individual accreditation systems that may serve as a ‘rite of passage.’ However, accreditation is usually specific to one particular coaching body, and is modelled on short training programmes with a focus on developing skills and completing coaching hours, rather than on enhancing critical thinking and understanding expected in academic study (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015).

Bachkirova & Lawton Smith (2015) argued that there are various issues that follow from the situation as described above. Firstly, there is a polarisation between qualification and accreditation of coaches that creates confusion for stakeholders and particularly newcomers, faced with a plethora of terms such as accreditation, certification, licensing, validation, etc. Secondly, the close inter-relationship between training providers and professional bodies along with the absence of an independent party that can question the evidence base and quality of training and accreditation may undermine the credibility of both. At the same time, the formal neutral qualification route provided by universities becomes
separated from this coupled relationship. Thus, we see that universities and professional bodies drift apart, resulting in an even wider gap between the training and the education of coaches. Training becomes learning how to coach and an entry to the profession, whereas education is something extra that leads to research and development of knowledge and therefore might not be necessary for those strongly oriented to being just practitioners. In our view, this leads to an impoverished image of coaching as a mechanical process and of the coach just as a technician.

This is not to say that a very concrete coaching approach to helping people to explore next steps is not useful. In principle, it is well justified as an activity that anyone can provide. However, coaching as a professional practice offers much more than that and therefore requires a level of study that matches its complexity. By using the term ‘professional practice’ and ‘professionalism’ we are not subscribing necessarily to the ambition of coaching to become a profession in the sense of an exclusive community (see the reasons for this in Lane, et al., 2014). Rather, we see professionalism as an important aspiration to high levels of service encompassing expertise and situational judgment; commitment to quality and ethical standards; integrity and accountability; and, therefore, consistency and rigour in the education and development of practitioners as a prerequisite (Lane, 2017; Health and Care Professionals Council, 2014).

The debate about skills and academic abilities

In differentiating coaching as professional activity, the applicability of Wampold’s assertion that in psychotherapy “the person of the therapist is the critical factor in the success of the therapy” (Wampold, 2001, p. 202) is becoming widely accepted in the coaching field (de Haan et al., 2013). In the light of this, it follows that coaching ‘capability’ spans much wider domains in comparison to just knowledge of practice methods.

Garvey (2017) helpfully differentiates three foci of professional knowledge: episteme, techne and phronesis. Episteme is the knowledge of the field, while techne refers to the skills employed. We generally have no issue with assuming that academic study clearly incorporates these two aspects of knowledge. Yet experienced practitioners without qualifications can frequently be heard to deride qualifications as “a bit of paper”, as if such qualifications ignore the third element: phronesis, or the higher-order thinking abilities applied to a particular domain, or one might say practical wisdom. Yet quite the opposite can and should be the case. For example, the descriptors to which UK
Higher Education Institutions match their programmes (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education - QAA) clearly address both the value of conceptual understanding and the integration of that knowledge into practice. The descriptors for Masters level education include a range of different aspects of the student’s learning. For example, one descriptor specifies “a critical understanding of current problems and/or insights [at] the forefront of their […] field of study or area of professional practice” (QAA, 2017, p. 28). Another highlights “conceptual understanding that enables the student […] to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses” (p. 28). It would be unusual if there were professionals who would not want their practice to be informed by such skills. However, the realities of the current ‘rite of passage’, privileging short-term training programmes, results in coaches that might lack these skills.

We also note that in contrast to short skills oriented programmes, locked in one paradigm of purpose, higher education aims to equip the citizen for understanding and challenging, if necessary, the established state of organisations and societies, thus expanding the paradigm. Coaching itself can be conceived, like education, as an emancipatory process. Therefore, study of the complexity and diversity of coaching adds to debates on why the short, sharp insights into coaching provided by training programmes may lack the depth, deliberation and durability required for coaching to be a force for wider social change and human emancipation (Shoukry, 2017).

**Multidisciplinarity of coaching**

Further challenges of an approach to coach education rest on the way the coaching discipline itself relates to other disciplines (Western, 2012; Drake, 2017). The coaching discipline draws from several other fields of knowledge (Bachkirova, 2017; Cox et al., 2014). They include generic disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, biology, sociology and the humanities, as well as more specific disciplines such as ethics, adult development and organisation studies. Closer in nature to coaching are other applied disciplines such as psychotherapy, Human Resource Development and training, and perhaps closest still, counselling, mentoring and consulting. This diversity has been nourishing ongoing debates on the discipline’s ‘conceptual foundation’ (Nelson & Hogan, 2009). Indeed, while there are several theories and bodies of knowledge that contribute to the emerging ‘conceptualisation’ of coaching (Bachkirova, 2017; Bachkirova et al., 2014), it is important to understand that the knowledge-base of coaching is creative and pluralistic (Bachkirova, 2017, p. 35). Together with acknowledging and appreciating this disciplinary
richness, we need to admit that this inevitably creates significant diversity in terms of the learning expectations of coaching and a challenge for educators and trainers to develop inclusive, coherent and integrated programmes that satisfy such expectations (e.g. Lane, 2017; Gray et al., 2016; Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015).

Making sense of these issues

In making sense of these issues, we acknowledge that there is, unfortunately, a limited, if not growing, literature on educating coaches (Bachkirova & Lawton-Smith, 2015; Gray et al., 2016; Lane, 2017; Garvey, 2017). In the main, it addresses the challenges around accreditation and incongruities of programmes accommodating critical thinking, skills development, practical experience, self-development, reflection and reflexivity (Gray et al., 2016; Lane, 2017, Garvey, 2017).

Gray et al. (2016), for example, identify in their critique that coach development programmes typically include a variety of psychological theories alongside those of adult learning and development. Other typical features of coach education programmes comprise the necessity for participants to build their own models of practice and the use of portfolios in demonstrating their experience and methods (Gray et al., 2016; Western, 2012). Commentators highlight the strengths of such elements, including the value of critically applying and enacting models suited to their personal skills, knowledge and attributes and self-development in creative ways, whilst simultaneously identifying the challenges of determining quality in assessment infrastructures which may be inflexible. Tackling such diverse knowledge bases in sufficient depth for analysis to be deemed critical and rigorous is difficult (Drake, 2017; Garvey, 2017; Gray et al., 2017; Western, 2012).

Reviewing this literature in light of the documents produced by professional bodies, a split becomes apparent between the ideas of education and training, academia and professional bodies, episteme and techne of coaching and in the conceptualisation of a developmental route for coaching practitioners. There is also a lack of conversation between the advocates of these sides and thus limited cross-fertilisation of ideas. Speculating about the reasons for this state of affairs, we believe that the different positions and critiques of each side are coming from the different agendas of the stakeholders that stem from, or are connected to, different principles and values about what coaching is in the first place, and what it is for.
In the academic literature, diverse conceptualizations of coaching have been emerging as an amalgamation of various paradigms, including postmodernism (Garvey, 2011), post-positivism (Grant, 2013; Palmer, 2008; Boyatzis, 2006), social constructionism (Drake, 2015; Stelter, 2014), and critical theory (Western, 2012), amongst others (Bachkirova, 2017). Such conceptualizations ‘define what is possible in practice, what theories and methods of practice are relevant and how the outcomes of practices can be evaluated’ (Bachkirova, 2017, p. 31). The most notable tension could be identified between the tendencies of modernism and critique of these tendencies from the postmodern perspectives (Bachkirova, 2017).

If we review the literature by practitioners to this analysis, the demarcation line becomes blurry. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis on goals, techniques and the impact of interventions (e.g. Rogers, 2012) – a typically modernist pursuit. On the other hand, the ambition for coaching is often formulated in humanistic terms, with the transformation of the client seeming to be the pinnacle of the process. It is interesting that the more humanistic aspect tends to be advocated in contrast to the old medical model (e.g. Krapu, 2016), arguing together with ‘positive psychologists’ that the client is ‘creative, resourceful and whole’ (p. 13), but trying to dress it in new scientific clothes. We, however, see the above tension as having outgrown its relevance and as now overplayed from the early stages when coaching was trying to differentiate itself from counselling and feeding the positive psychology movement. In any case, in the education and training of coaches, the medical model was not as influential to warrant significant attention.

Our argument is that the main issue in the development of coaches lies in still too powerful a modernist worldview. A coupled relationship between competency-based accreditations and training programmes leads to a reductionist view on the coach as a professional and how he/she is educated. Postmodern literature on coaching (e.g. Garvey, 2011), although providing a powerful critique of reductionism, shies away from offering practical approaches to education of coaches. Therefore, we believe that another philosophical position is required, and that one based on pragmatism and constructivism is more productive for addressing the issues of coach education. This becomes most apparent when we consider the differences in the way coaching and the purpose of coaching are conceptualised from what we call: value-neutral instrumentalism and developmentalism.
Explaining our position

According to value-neutral instrumentalism coaching is seen as a professional service provided to clients in order for them to achieve their goals, whatever these goals might be. It requires techniques and skills of the coach. The coach is almost a value-neutral holder of useful tools professionally applied. The approach that is used is largely consistent for every client and can become increasingly efficient. In this model, competency-oriented training is an appropriate way of educating coaches.

According to developmentalism, which we see as corresponding to the main principles of Dewey’s pragmatism (2016), development could be seen as both the means and the end of coaching. According to this position coaching is a meaningful dialogue in which new ideas, values and actions are conceived with an overarching aim of developing the overall capabilities of clients to engage with their environment. It may happen in ways that are not specified at the start. Because the approach depends on the quality of relationship with the client, who the coach is as a person, and the psychological state of both client and coach, it is by nature highly unpredictable. Educating coaches within this paradigm is therefore about developing the coach as an instrument of coaching (Bachkirova, 2016).

It is inevitable that the educational approaches for these different conceptualisations of coaching would differ. Although it might be argued that these two views are compatible and should be equally present under ideal conditions, the practicalities of developing training and education programmes require an emphasis on either one or another. By practicalities we mean the length of the programme, the requirements of awarding bodies and the expectations and commitment of the learners.

Making explicit that the philosophy of pragmatism and constructivism provides a broad framework for our choice, we have to acknowledge that our concerns about practicalities and principles have been shared in more mature disciplines such as education (Eisner, 2002) and health (Kim, 1999; White, et al., 2006) but have not been widely articulated in coaching. While there is significant reference to writers on pragmatist and constructivist learning across the coaching literature (Schön, Kolb, and Knowles could almost be thought of as core theorists for coaches) this tends to focus on the practical aspects of the coaching process. However, it is becoming more noticeable that writers taking similar views to ours of professional development in coaching make broad reference both to pragmatists such as Dewey (e.g. Cox, 2013; Garvey, 2017;
Bachkirova, 2017), and constructivists such as Vygotsky (Garvey et al, 2014), Bruner (Garvey et al., 2014) and Piaget (Jackson, 2004).

While these influences have existed as themes in the critical coaching literature generally, more recent theory has linked constructivism and pragmatism both as a way of thinking about coaching, and as a specific way forward for the discipline. Cox (2013), for example, immediately posited coaching as “a facilitated, dialogic, reflective learning process” (Cox, 2013, p. 1). Not only does this definition encapsulate both pragmatic and constructivist elements, but Cox goes on to argue that such a position democratises and personalises the learning process; her book is even sub-titled “A pragmatic inquiry into the coaching process”. Bachkirova (2017, p. 31) similarly describes coaching as “a process of joint meaning-making” and “a complex interpretative process.” Bachkirova (2017) also outlines the more optimistic solution that pragmatism offers to the tension between the potential superficiality of modernist attitudes, and the potential cynicism of post-modernist positions.

In the following section, we describe the explicitly formulated intentions for coach education that follow from our pragmatist and constructivist philosophy:

1. Developing the coach as an instrument of practice
2. Increasing reflexivity and criticality
3. Highlighting uncertainty, complexity and paradoxes in the contexts of practice
4. Practising and arriving at congruence between the self and style of practice
5. Developing ethical maturity

**Developmentalism in action**

**1. Developing the coach as an instrument of practice**

It follows from the above that the main underlying intention of our programmes is to develop the self of the coach as the route to effective practice. It is derived from the logic that is applicable for all complex professions, but particularly relevant to coaching. Alvesson (2001) has argued that in complex professions, knowledge and specific intellectual skills are intertwined with less ‘technical’ qualities such as flexibility, social skills, genuine interest in the client and other expressions of who the practitioner is as a person.
Consequently, it is not possible to identify what would be the main factor in the successful professional contributions. Even when clients evaluate the quality of service, such evaluation is a subject of a personal relationship with practitioners and the image practitioners create.

Coaching has other factors that make the role of the “professional as a person” even more prominent. As the agendas of coaching often involve topics of high personal relevance for the client, the process requires that the practitioners connect with clients on a personal level, creating relationships that could be described as intimate in the widest sense of its term (de Haan et al., 2013; Western, 2012). In creating such a relationship and making decisions in the process of coaching, the coach’s whole self is expressed in his/her interventions as they “are initiated not only from the knowledge and understanding of the clients’ situation, context, psychological makeup and goals, but also from the personal resonating with all of these in the moment” (Bachkirova, 2016, p. 144).

The developmentalist approach is also specifically not value neutral. Coaches’ own beliefs and values are behind their association with certain coaching schools and traditions. Their use of explicit theoretical models is value-charged in practice, as the coach’s choices of approaches and interventions are intertwined with their personal values. Therefore, it is not possible to say which interventions come from theories and which from personal beliefs.

A clear consequence of such conceptualisation of coaching and of the coach is that the uniqueness of each coach is highly valued. In this light, moulding the coach into a “one fit for all” approach does not make sense at any stage of development or assessment of the coach (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015; Garvey, 2011; Bachkirova, 2016). In this paper, we are mainly concerned with the nature of educational programmes and the way such uniqueness can be taken into consideration, nourished, but also stretched and encouraged to unfold further. As noted previously, learning the basic skills and the knowledge base of the discipline should be on offer as a foundation of practice. However, the underlying focus of the educational process is on the self and the next step in coach development, enabling coaches to create their own unique style of practice and to be congruent with their role of a coach. To achieve this aim, criticality and reflexivity are two sides of the developmental process.
2. Increasing criticality and reflexivity

Criticality is essential because the objective of coach education is not only to assimilate the knowledge of the discipline, but to evaluate it, to be discerning about it, to be able to identify what knowledge is meaningful and in what contexts. Critical thinking is therefore amongst the most strongly advocated skills in postgraduate education (Wright, 2012; Cox, 2013; Bolton, 2014) and strongly aligned to the academic study of coaching in the developmentalist paradigm. Critical thinking entails “making sense of the world through a process of questioning the questions, challenging assumptions, recognising that bodies of knowledge can be chaotic and evolving” (Jones-Devitt & Smith, 2007, p. 7). It also creates opportunities for new meaning making that enable coaches to understand that their idiosyncratic interpretations can be diverse from those of others. Criticality has an important role to play in helping coaches develop a more “sophisticated understanding” about the essence of knowledge and how it is most appropriately generated and used, respecting the pluralism of theories and models that inform the coaching practice (Bachkirova, 2017, p. 38).

Reflexivity is equally important for coaches in order to become aware of their values and principles of change and development, of their drives and intentions as an element of building an approach to practice that is congruent with their understanding of the way they are. A wider concept of reflection has been defined as the “in-depth consideration of events, situations, words, and actions” in order to achieve a deeper understanding of them and how people view themselves through them (Iordanou et al., 2017, p. 38). In essence, it is the “discipline of engaging in reflective practice activities” (Dallos & Stedmon, 2009, p. 1). Reflexivity is an ability to take this further towards the “questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions, frames, and mental models” (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1341). In essence, reflexivity entails deep reflections upon one’s habitual perceptions, assumptions, and values (Bolton, 2014, p. xxiii). Perceived in this way, reflexivity is a significant learning and development instrument that plays a central role in our philosophy of coach education.

Both criticality and reflexivity allow the coach to avoid the trap of what Schön (1984, p. 60) called “parochial narrowness of vision.” By cultivating these we aim to facilitate reflexive agency in our learners, just like coaches strive to encourage their clients’ reflexive agency. This highly constructivist aspect of our pedagogic approach echoes other voices on the significance of

3. **Highlighting uncertainty, complexity and paradoxes in the contexts of practice**

Value-neutral instrumentalism and developmentalism see coaching and the world in which it operates in substantially different ways. In contrast to the linear and reductive value-neutral instrumentalist view of the world, developmentalism inherently recognises complexity and therefore aligns to theories such as a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) (Stacey, 2003; Cavanagh & Lane, 2012). The Complex Adaptive Systems model implies that the organisations, clients and their relationships are in a constant state of flux (Stacey, 2003) with many different factors that influence each other, making simple causal relationship between them impossible to identify. According to this view the process of coaching is therefore seen as “a conversational, reflexive narrative inquiry … as an alternative to restrictive rules and procedures” (Stacey, 2012, p. 95).

In this view, coaching is inevitably challenged by the “blurriness” (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012) that flux produces and also can itself differ in terms of the form, purpose, context and specific characteristics. Coaching can take the form of a special type of conversation; for example, between a manager and an employee or that of a professional service provided by an executive coach. The purpose here might be to address immediate work challenges, develop skills or to participate in a more developmental learning process. Coaching might equally take place in the workplace with a paying organizational sponsor, or outside the employment context, to work at a more personal level. The characteristics of a coaching session might vary depending on whether the coach’s own practice is informed from humanistic or more deterministic principles and other frames of understanding. In light of this, the education and development of coaches requires an approach that does not over-simplify the conditions in which they will work, and highlights the importance of understanding and flexibility, commensurate with the complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity that coaches will experience in their practice.

4. **Practising and arriving at congruence between the self and style of practice**

If coaching operates in client situations that are characterised by uncertainty and complexity with manifold paradoxes, it follows, then, that learning about coaching has to be experiential, reflective and embedded in the
complexity of real world practice. In keeping with many other postgraduate programmes, our programme’s capstone task is a research project or dissertation. This somewhat focuses on declarative and shared knowledge. However, we have argued throughout this paper that coaching is itself a reflexive activity, which attends to the interface between the internal and external worlds of knowledge. So our approach to this is to ask students – (as a capstone task for the first year of the programme) – to articulate their “model of practice,” based on the reflection, supervision and theorising around their immediate practice experience.

The framework for this task follows a structure modified from Lane (2006) for the orientation of coaching supervisors (Lane, 2006; Lane & Corrie, 2015). In essence, it is now based on the structure of Why, What and How of their practice. Our adaptation of the model foregrounds ‘philosophy’ (why) as an essential and conscious underpinning of the student’s model of practice. In this way, the ‘purpose’ of the intervention – what the practice is intended to achieve - becomes more closely linked to the student’s underpinning assumptions and values about life, knowledge and the social world. Finally, the actual design of the practice can be related to and aligned with two other foundational aspects of the coaching model.

For students who may have started their studies, as mentioned previously, expecting a normative pedagogical experience in the ‘instrumentalist’ mode we have described previously, this exercise can be challenging. Most developing practitioners have not undertaken this sort of reflexive enquiry and ways of thinking philosophically are unfamiliar to most people. Despite that, the exercise can be seen to produce a number of positive outcomes. Students report the development of their coaching model, along with the experimentation and adjustments they make to it in practice, as the foundation for their future development; some report that it enables them to practice with more conviction and more confidence; for most students at the very least it acts as a mechanism to synthesise their practical and theoretical learning. These outcomes reflect, in effect, a process of practice maturation. Students typically experience at the outset an initial struggle to grasp a sense of perspective on a broad body of knowledge (episteme), and uncertain of their own practice they look to ‘grab hold’ of methods and techniques that they can rely on to work (techne). The integration of this experience into a framework that reflects their own values and beliefs enables a more personal level of enquiry and a practice congruent to the way they see themselves: a reflexive development of phronesis.
5. Development of ethical maturity

We appreciate that the ability to understand others is a crucial aspect of ethical behaviour (Iordanou et al., 2017). Ethical maturity, like reflexive practice, develops gradually, as a conglomeration of experiences, in conjunction with familial, educational, and cultural values, and similarly enables individuals to construct meaning of themselves, their relationships with others, and the world around them (Kegan, 1982). The development of personal maturity goes hand in hand with the growth of ethical maturity (Kohlberg, 1981).

The cultivation of ethical maturity is achieved through the systematic exposure to ethical dilemmas that provides opportunities for conscious reflection on an individual’s personal and professional values and beliefs. Continuous exposure to such situations can be challenging, yet amenable to the development of ethical maturity (Iordanou et al., 2015; Iordanou & Williams, 2017; Iordanou et al., 2017). This is because such settings can encourage debates and discussion on complex ethical issues, promote healthy dissonance, and, ultimately, cultivate tolerance towards the discomfort that ethical dilemmas can generate.

While formal academic credentials do not guarantee the development of ethical maturity, we strongly believe that the process of learning in such settings is enabling for its cultivation. This is precisely because the learning process is built on the co-creation of knowledge within communities of learning, where both instructors and learners can freely exercise critical reasoning. In consequence, such settings can become ‘powerhouses of ethical thinking and behaviour’, where learners can freely take responsibility for their beliefs and values, while sharing their views in a joint effort to develop ethical consciousness and enhance their ethical maturity (Iordanou et al., 2017, p. 151).

Challenges our philosophy presents

It is probably clear from the description of the principles of our programmes that it is extremely rewarding to work with developing coaches in a way that is congruent to what we believe in and value. However, as every choice has consequences, it is both important and useful to describe the challenges that we face, and the questions that we struggle with, within the constraints of an academic institution. Amongst the most prominent issues are:

- Meeting formal assessment requirements
- Potentially losing students who are not ready for such a process
• Forming expectations of students and ascertaining what progress looks like

Meeting formal assessment requirements

By formulating our programme in constructivist and pragmatic terms we create something of a challenge in assessment of students’ progress. On the one hand, some of the qualities that we most value – in particular, development of self and reflexivity – are more problematic to assess than are, for example, the acquisition or even application of knowledge. Indeed, there is some educational debate about the feasibility or appropriateness of assessing such qualities. Bourner (2003) points out the conflict between objective measurement and subjective experience, while Brockbank & McGill (2007, p. 195) helpfully differentiate the tendency for learning outcomes to point towards the assessment of product, while the interest in reflective learning and reflexivity may be one of process. For all these authors, along with Moon (2013), the issues above are not insurmountable with some thought. Our own approach starts with dialogue on the meaning of these concepts and a constructive exploration of what it means to learn more deeply, and to reflect on the self and one’s own perspective. Assessment focuses on how that understanding of the process of reflexivity is applied to real-life practice issues as they arise.

A second issue of assessment that presents itself under this general view of professional development lies in the role of skills and skills assessment. To restate the underpinning outlook on professional education, it is that through reflective learning, criticality and a mastery of a sufficient body of knowledge, students will be equipped to develop a practice that is robust, effective and ethical. Given that this inherently implies a ‘journey’ metaphor of learning (see Garvey, 2017), allied to the somewhat problematic nature of competency frameworks that we have already described, it seems nonsensical to assess students skills so far as they have developed at a particular time. The mismatch this creates with professional bodies and accreditation processes has already been explored in this paper. Nonetheless, this seems to be a secondary problem to the alternative: to provide a learning experience and assessment regime that is incongruent with the philosophy underlying coaching practice itself.

Potentially losing students who are not ready for such a process

This approach to coach training and education necessitates embracing uncertainty, complexity, and paradox that the coaching practice can entail. This is a challenging request to make of learners, who might expect a more
normative, teacher-centred approach. Yet, embracing and expressing uncertainty, complexity, and paradox as a way of facilitating subjectivity, sensitivity, interaction, and responsibility (Sutherland, 2013) is a testing task that can disaffect and even distance learners from such training programmes that employ a constructivist approach to learning. In addition to many other aspects of learning we attach great meaning to the process of critical reflexivity as a process entering what Schön (1987, p. 297) called the “hall of mirrors,” in order to create reflective practitioners who examine and re-examine their practice. For this reason, it might be worth accepting that this learning approach might, indeed, not be for everyone.

One of the options is to accept this situation, and simply communicate to potential students our pedagogical and practice principles, such that they are able to make their choices before accepting the offer. This would be unsatisfactory for us for two reasons. Firstly, because it contradicts our own philosophy of developmentalism that implies that everyone has the right to be where they are in their developmental journey and learn in tune with their unique self. Secondly, because providing sufficient information is not as easy as it sounds (see our next challenge). At the moment, we address the problem of readiness for this type of learning by providing students who find it difficult with opportunities to explore themselves and by giving feedback that is scaffolding by its nature, not in relation to particular standards, but in relation to the next steps that seem available for them. The remaining problem is that such scaffolding is highly subjective and may also be seen as vague and insufficient. We are currently able to counter institutional pressures (Mohrman, Ma & Baker, 2008) to relax these elements of challenge to those who may struggle with our philosophical approach, due to the strong external and internal support, via formal validations, and wider recognition of the learning experienced and reported by our alumni.

**Forming expectations of students and ascertaining what progress looks like**

The problem of giving information to form expectations of our approach and associated learning process is that this experience is often unsubscribed, highly individualised and contextualised, bordering, at times on the ethereal. Articulating it is frustrating for those who are in a position to describe this process, but aware of how futile their attempt might be. Even guiding learners through this domain of self-discovery as they develop their practice is not a pedestrian endeavour, but explaining the miscellany of experiences learners will encounter is of a higher order. Here the challenges identified by others in
training, educating and developing coaches (Western, 2012; Gray, 2010; Lane, 2017; Cox, 2013; Bachkirova, 2011; Worth, 2012) are reinforced.

On the receiving end of the information about learning trajectory, it typically creates a sense of precariousness amongst the more timid and a real ache for knowledge and experience for those conditioned to clear protocols and answers. It may ring hollow initially, and every cohort, despite signalling in communication, identifies those who were not quite prepared for the level of critical engagement, interaction and personal challenge involved in the programme.

There are also significant challenges in providing feedback that is meaningful at each particular stage of the student struggle with the process. It requires charting progress towards some benchmarks, which must be mapped in an academic frame in our world. To provide such tailored guidance and flexibility we continue to engage in a dialogue between peers, faculty, clients and supervisors to share insights and accumulate experience. However, the paradox of meeting expectations remains. It seems impossible to make the route to progress explicit and consensual. If the type of education that we offer changes the perspective and potentially the mindset of the student, but some students do not know what to expect and how to evaluate if their expectations are met, we have to rely as educators on our own interpretation of their feedback.

Conclusions

It seems that no approaches to coach education are without controversies. In this paper, we have shared our concerns and described the choices that we made based on the underpinning philosophical principles of pragmatism and constructivism. We explored the questions that remain our concerns in relation to both the congruence with these principles and practicalities of making them work in the process of educating coaches. In spite of these concerns we believe that developmentalism is a more powerful and appropriate stance for coach education in comparison to the alternative value-neutral instrumentalism. First of all, it aligns better with the fundamental attributes of professionalism in this field – a value that all stakeholders of coaching share. Secondly, it more closely defines what is implicit in many coaches’ practice and thus provides a clearer framework than more general claims to align to, e.g. 'humanism.'

Finally, it is our wish that the themes raised here are seen as an invitation to share all views and to challenge our choices. These topics are relevant not
only to educators - we hope to stimulate the voices of students, past and current. In relation to professional bodies, the messages of this paper add to those already expressed challenges to accreditation systems. We urge professional bodies to engage with the problematizing of such systems in relation to the development of professionalism.

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The Science Behind Powerful Questioning: A Systemic Questioning Framework for Coach Educators and Practitioners

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Abstract

At the heart of the coaching process is the core competency of questioning, often referred to as powerful questioning. Coach educators and trainers diligently teach students the importance of asking questions (versus giving advice) during coaching sessions and teach them to structure questions appropriately (such as using open versus closed-ended questions). Still, coaching students struggle with knowing what questions to ask and when during their work with clients. Although many students search for a list of so-called magic coaching questions, I contend that coaches instead need a framework of questioning to use when coaching a client. A questioning framework could help educators teach the science of questioning as a means for developing coaches’ professional judgment, thereby helping coaches make better-informed choices about what types of questions to ask clients during coaching sessions. This paper presents an evidence-based conceptual framework called the Systemic Questioning Framework. Application of the framework during a coaching conversation may increase the coach’s confidence and competence when making decisions regarding how to shape questions in the moment in response to the client, enabling better coaching outcomes.

Keywords: powerful questioning, dialogue, systems thinking, executive coaching, team coaching

Introduction

In my work as a graduate-level coach educator, assessor, and supervisor for two accredited programs, I teach a combination of performance skills, theoretical knowledge, and ICF core competencies. Despite the skill and knowledge students gain through this education process, they often worry about not knowing what questions to ask during a coaching session. Sometimes they do not realize that asking simple questions about the context of the presenting situation can serve as inputs for crafting a powerful question which in turn may have the potential to create a positive shift in the client.

During one recent individual supervision session, a student who works as a director of talent management for a national distribution company lamented about how he got stuck when coaching a client. I already had listened to a
recording of the coaching session he conducted before we met for supervision and prepared some notes for our supervision conversation. I noticed, for example, that the rhythm of the coaching conversation was broken when the student asked his client a long, meandering question. His client responded by saying she was confused. Here is how my coaching supervision conversation with my student unfolded about this break of rhythm. (Note my use reflective questions to help increase his self-awareness about his decision-making process for asking questions):

Laura: “What was your intention for asking that question to your client?”

Student: “What do you mean?”

Laura (digging deeper): “For example, was your intention to orient yourself and your client to the coaching situation or was your intention to influence a change in your client’s thinking, feeling, actions, etc.?”

Student: “I hadn’t thought about that. I was just trying to follow the client’s agenda.”

Laura (reflective question to increase student’s self-awareness): “What were you managing inside yourself during this coaching session with your client?”

Student: “Feeling stuck from anxiety and panic, like a deer in the headlights, because I didn’t know what to ask next. I just want to ask the right question at the right time. I want to do better at asking powerful questions. [Laughter] Maybe I just need a list of magic questions to use when I’m coaching clients so I don’t get stuck.”

Although I applaud the student’s desire to effectively coach his client, relying on a so-called magic list of questions applicable to any coaching situation is misguided, because coaching is a dynamic process that resists prescription (Rogers, 2016). Rather than searching for a magical list of questions, coaches need to understand the science of questioning to guide their decisions about what types of questions to ask and when. In doing so, they increase their professional judgment. Murphy (2006) defined the concept of professional judgment as using knowledge (e.g., evidence-based models, frameworks and/or theory) to guide and evaluate one’s own decisions and actions. By increasing one’s professional judgment about the science of questioning, coaches can make informed decisions about how to shape questions that could positively impact the client within the context of the coaching goal and the client’s environment. The result can be far fewer ‘deer-in-the-headlights’ coaching moments and far more time being present and effective when working with clients.
This paper presents an evidence-based framework called the Systemic Questioning Framework (SQF) for use by coach educators, trainers, and practitioners. It categorizes the core competency of questioning into four types of questions: clarifying, meaning making, catalyzing, and mobilizing. The ICF core competency of ‘powerful questioning’ resides within the catalyzing category of the SQF. It is important to note that other types of questions such as clarifying and meaning-making questions serve as inputs to making decisions about when and how to ask a powerful question. The balance of this paper outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the framework, discusses how it may be applied, and considers its implications for practice.

**Questioning as a coaching competency**

Coaching is an emerging and cross-disciplinary occupation (Gray, 2011) practiced by professional coaches, managers, consultants, human resource professionals, and corporate leaders (Ruane, 2013). The diverse demographics of its practitioners position coaching in an ambiguous status as a field of practice. As part of the move to professionalize and standardize the field, different organizations and researchers have identified a number of core competencies that underlie effective coaching. Core coaching competencies refer to the capabilities, unique skills, approaches, and behaviors that coaching professionals need to employ to effectively assist clients in pursuing their goals (Maltbia, Marsick, & Ghosh, 2014). Various core competency definitions have been outlined for coaches, such as the International Coach Federation’s 11 core coaching competencies (ICF, 2017), and the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches’s 15 competencies (WABC, 2017).

It is generally accepted that during a coaching conversation, coaches respond to their clients with both statements and questions. For example, coaches practice direct communication using a coaching approach to share observations, intuitions, thoughts, or feelings, without attachment to being right (ICF, 2017). Importantly, although coaching behaviors include making statements, coaching is primarily an inquiry-based practice. Cox (2013) claimed that questioning is the key competency within the coaching context, but noted that no specific theory of questioning exists for guiding coaching professionals in enacting this critical capability.

Although the ICF provides a definition and behavioral markers of the core competency called powerful questioning (one specific type of questioning), the coaching literature lacks a science of asking coaching questions, in general. What is needed in the coaching field and practice are
coaching specific theoretical frameworks to increase professional judgment that can inform coaches’ decisions about what types of questions to ask (and when to ask them) during the coaching conversation.

Models of questioning

**Empirical coaching framework**

I conducted an empirical research study about coaching teams to identify the behaviors coaches use when interacting with a team and to identify what influenced the coaches’ choices of behaviors (Hauser, 2014). The research culminated in a new team coaching framework called Shape-Shifting.

According to the Shape-Shifting framework, coaches’ role behaviors vary along two independent continuums: (a) directive, the extent to which the coach offers statements, provides education models, and makes suggestions, and (b) dialogic, the extent to which the coach uses a client-centered, relational stance of inquiring and exploring while interacting with the team. Importantly, this continuum breaks an ideological barrier in coaching by finding that coaches do at times exhibit directive behaviors such as suggesting and educating.

The concept that coaches vary from more directive (task-oriented, tell-oriented) to less directive (process-oriented; ask-oriented) role behaviors supports other literature about the roles and functions of coaching (Clutterbuck, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Hamlin *et al.*, 2007; Huffington, 2007; Ives, 2008; Lippitt & Lippit, 1986). My research further indicated that coaches spend the majority of their time on the non-directive end of the continuum, meaning they more often use inquiry-based behaviors and less often uses telling-types of behaviors.

The concept of the dialogic stance is consistent with Stein’s (2008) work on conversational identities and with Bushe and Marshak (2009) and Marshak and Grant (2008), who describe discursive, conversational approaches as a means for creating change. When coaches use dialogic behaviors, they engage in two-way conversations with clients and serve as partners who help clients deeply explore the current situation and then shift toward new ways of thinking and behaving (Brunning, 2006; Gottlieb, 1997; Stein, 2008).

Combining the two continuums, I classified four roles available to the coach depending on client need to support an intended outcome: advisor (high directive/low dialogic); educator (high directive/high dialogic); catalyzer (low...
directive/high dialogic); and assimilator (low directive/low dialogic). These role behaviors vary over time and are located at different points along directive and dialogic continuums. I used the metaphor of shape-shifting to illustrate that coaches fluidly and intentionally shift their “shape” (i.e., their roles and behaviors) depending on the situation in the moment and over time.

I realized that these role categorizations help inform a science of questioning for coaches. For example, if coaches take on an advisor role, the nature and intent of their questions would differ than when they play a catalyzing role. By reflecting on the function of each role in a coaching relationship, coaches can generate questions that honor the intent of the role and the needs of the client in that moment.

The dialogic continuum from the Shape-Shifting Framework also is consistent with a coaching approach to questioning because it assumes a relational, client-centered stance. However, the directive continuum and its focus on making statements likely would not be included in a questioning framework because the very nature of questioning is based on inquiry. Thus, although coaches use both statements and questions during a coaching session, this paper focuses on creating a framework to elucidate the science behind the core competency of questioning.

The questioning framework presented in this paper builds upon the dialogic continuum of the Shape-Shifting Framework as well as a questioning model drawn from the family systems therapy literature. The next two sections describe this family systems model and how it has been adapted for use in organizational settings.

**Interventive Interviewing Framework**

Tomm’s (1987, 1988) Intervening Interview model suggests that therapists use different types of questions for different functions, from those that orient the therapist to the client’s situation and experiences to those that provoke therapeutic change. He further observed that questions vary in the extent to which they indicate a judgmental versus neutral or accepting attitude from the therapist. Tomm located therapeutic questions on two dimensions: (a) intention, which indicates whether the therapist’s question aims to gather information about the client’s situation (orienting) or help the client move toward a certain outcome (influencing) and (b) assumption, which indicates whether the therapist’s question is meant to help clients see how they have
erred or how they ought to behave (lineal) or whether the therapist’s question invites clients to solve their own problem (circular).

The two dimensions yield four types of questions:

1. **Lineal questions (orienting intent with lineal assumption):** Investigate by asking questions about who, what, when, where, how long, and why of the presenting issue, thus eliciting information from the client to build both the therapist's and the client’s understanding of the client's situation.

2. **Circular questions (orienting intent with circular assumption):** Invite the client to share information about the situation and to clarify relevant context and relationships, enabling the therapist and client to make new discoveries. For example, these discoveries may include recurrent patterns that connect persons, objects, actions, perceptions, ideas, feelings, events, and beliefs within a context.

3. **Strategic questions (influencing intent with lineal assumption):** Influence change in the client by asking leading questions (e.g., "What would happen if you come home at 6:00 every night for a week?"). Strategic questions are intended to be corrective and can help shift a stuck system.

4. **Reflexive questions (influencing intent with circular assumption):** Draw upon the client’s own knowledge, competencies, problem-solving, and idea-generating resources by focusing clients’ awareness on their own behaviors and influencing desired behavior changes.

Some elements of this model align well within the context of coaching. For example, circular types of questions have a posture of acceptance, dialogically co-creating meaning, and engaging in conversational partnerships with clients - all of which are consistent with coaching approaches. Reflexive types of questions most closely resemble the coaching competency of powerful questioning (the type of questioning cited in ICF’s [2017] list of core competencies) in that they catalyze change by helping clients construct their own goal-oriented solutions.

Lineal assumptions do not transfer as well to a coaching context. From a coaching perspective, clients do not need coaches to correct them or pressure them to do what the coach thinks is best. At the same time, coaches may sparingly use lineal questions to orient to the client’s situation and use strategic questions to help clients get unstuck, yet the stance of the coach would remain
dialogic (not corrective). In this way, applying Tomm’s (1988) Interventive Interviewing model to coaching would require adaptation - particularly related to lineal assumptions. The critical take away from Tomm’s framework is that coaches may increase their professional judgment by being aware of their intention about what types of questions they are using and for what effect.

Adaptation of Interventive Interviewing model for use in organizations

Hornstrup et al. (2012) adapted Tomm’s (1988) Interventive Interviewing model for use in organizations. First, they explicitly added the lens of a social constructionist paradigm, which assumes that people create their own sense of reality through their interactions with others and their environments. It follows, according to this paradigm, that multiple realities exist and perceptions of reality can change over time, which is consistent with a coaching approach.

Second, Hornstrup et al. replaced the assumptions dimension with a time dimension of past, present, future. This change meant that all questions asked were circular in nature, but varied in terms of whether they were asking about past choices, present options, or future possibilities. The time dimension is consistent with my practical experience and empirical research that coaching conversations have a natural life cycle. The coaching conversation typically begins with an exploration of the presenting situation that often is linked to a past event or situation. After the coach and client sufficiently understand the content and context of the presenting situation, the coaching conversation shifts toward the future, developing a picture of the future desired state and crafting some actions about that desired future state.

Third, they adapted Tomm’s intention dimension: Although they kept the orienting intention, they replaced the term “influencing” with “constructing” to underscore the social constructionist paradigm. Fourth, question types were phrased to reflect organizational language (e.g., lineal questions became situation-clarifying questions). Fifth, Hornstrup et al. pointed out that within organizational settings, questions should not only focus on oneself, but also on one’s context (i.e., the larger system or organization within which the issue is occurring) and one’s meta-context (i.e., the relationship between the coach and client). The incorporation of a systemic approach to coaching helps address criticisms that the coaching field often fails to place systemic factors at the core of the coaching process (Brown & Grant, 2010).

Despite its benefits for elucidating the systemic component and the time dimension to Tomm’s (1988) model, Hornstrup et al.’s removal of the circular
assumption dimension may be problematic for developing a broad science of questioning. This is because coaching is deeply rooted in the concept of a dialogic (partnering with client) stance; Tomm’s circular assumption represents this type of client-centered approach. A dialogic stance nurtures the coach-client relationship, fostering an environment characterized by curiosity, openness, and trust, thus enabling the possibilities of co-exploration and co-creation. Thus, I contend that a questioning framework for use in the context of coaching should include this important concept of dialogue.

**Creating a Questioning Framework for Coaching**

The frameworks discussed in this paper (Hauser, 2014; Hornstrup *et al.*, 2012; Tomm, 1987) offer insights into the science behind questioning. I applied these insights to the context of coaching to create an expanded conceptual framework called The Systemic Questioning Framework (SQF). Five features distinguish the SQF from the Interventive Interviewing model:

- A time dimension (past, present, future) is superimposed onto the intention continuum
- A dialogic stance continuum replaces the assumptions continuum
- A distinct set of four question types are outlined
- Purposes, effects, and risks of each question type are acknowledged
- Three systemic levels for each question type are identified

My first step was to add time as a context marker in relation to the intention (orienting/influencing) continuum (see horizontal axis in Figure 1 below). Time was added because the coach’s intention at the beginning of a coaching session is to orient oneself and the client to the presenting situation, and to events or experiences that occurred in the past that lead to the present situation. Furthermore, an orienting intent helps the coach and client understand the context of the situation such as what meaning the client makes about the situation. Once the coach and client have an understanding of the situation, then the coach’s intention shifts toward influencing some sort of change. For example, a change may occur in client’s perceptions or beliefs, which in turn may generate new possibilities that lead to a new awareness and mobilizes the client’s energy toward the future.

Second, I replaced the assumptions continuum with a dialogic stance (see vertical axis) because a lineal assumption, with its characteristic corrective
posture and judgmental effect, opposes the client-centered relational approach of coaching. The dialogic stance presented in the framework is characterized by a relational posture taken by the coach that maintains the coach-client relationship and fosters mutual understanding, reflection, learning, and calls to action. The two ends of the dialogic continuum are labeled initiating and reflecting. For example, a coach would use an initiating stance to begin the discovery about the client’s situation, then later in the conversation would initiate actions toward a future desired state. A coach would use a reflecting stance to help reveal the clients’ deeper thinking and feelings regarding their present situation and future possibilities.

The intersection of the coach’s intent (with time markers) and the coach’s stance toward the client looks like the visual in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Two Dimensions of the Systematic Questioning Framework

My third step in creating the framework was to label the four types of questions produced by the two dimensions. Each question type was labeled to reflect language that more closely aligns with coaching versus therapeutic traditions. These types are: clarifying (orienting and initiating), meaning making (orienting and reflecting), catalyzing (reflecting and influencing), and
mobilizing (initiating and influencing). For example, coaches ask clarifying and meaning-making questions to generate understanding for both the client and the coach, which serves as inputs to formulate catalyzing and mobilizing types of questions to effect change and stimulate action.

I found that each type of question was associated with a particular reason for asking, desired result, and potential unwanted consequence. For example, Tomm (1988) emphasized that the actual effect of a question on a client may be different than what was intended. If coaches can anticipate potential disconnects, they may experience less anxiety, deer-in-the-headlights moments, and more space to consider alternative actions when questions fail to have the desired impact. Understanding the potential risk of different types of questions also is important for identifying potential overuse or adverse impacts of questioning. Therefore, my fourth step in creating the framework was to explicitly identify the purpose, intended effect, and risk for each question type.

Fifth, consistent with Hornstrup et al. (2012), I recognized that each type of question may be posed to any or all three levels of the organizational system: self (the client), contextual (the client’s broader system), and meta (alliance between the coach and client). Although sample questions are offered in the next section to elucidate the meaning of each type of question and the different levels of the system, these questions are not meant to be prescriptive nor all inclusive.

**Systemic Questioning Framework**

The SQF (see Figure 2) suggests that coaches initiate coaching conversations with the clients in a dialogical way to investigate the presenting situation and help shape a coaching goal for the session. The coach often begins by using clarifying questions to investigate the who, what, when, where, how of the situation.

During this discovery, the coach expands the dialogue by delving into meaning-making questions and digging deeper into reflections related to the client’s values and feelings about the situation. The conversation and information gained begins to influence changes in thinking and/or feeling, associated with the use of catalyzing types of questions that test and even challenge the client’s perceptions, thinking, and behaviors.

Once a new awareness or learning has occurred, then the coach often initiates a conversation using mobilizing questions that direct energy toward the
future and help construct actions and learning that move clients toward actualizing their goals. Along the way, the coach considers asking the four types of questions through the lens of the three different systemic levels.

It is important to mention that although the example I just provided may sound like a linear process, it is not. The SQF is a dynamic model such that coaches shift the type of question in response to client needs in the moment.

Let’s now delve more deeply into the practical application of the model organized by each of the four types of questions. After a brief discussion of each type of question, sample questions are offered categorized by the three levels of system (self, contextual, and meta).

1. **Clarifying questions** (orienting intention with initiating stance): The purpose of asking clarifying questions is to help the coach and the client understand the client’s current situation and relevant past information related to the situation. Answers to these questions help the coach and the client align their understanding of the situation and build a common ground for the future generative part of the coaching session. The coach’s stance during the dialogue tends to be more initiating than
reflecting. Like a detective, the coach investigates facts such as who, what, when, where, how long, and even why. The intended effect of asking clarifying questions is to build understanding about the presenting situation. Although clarifying questions can help surface information critical to the coaching goals, overuse of clarifying questions can result in the client feeling interrogated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System Level</th>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented</td>
<td>What is the focus of our session today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How did this situation come about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How often does this happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>Who else is involved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whose interests are also at stake?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What else needs to be addressed or resolved in relation to this situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-contextual</td>
<td>How would you like me to work with you during our coaching session today?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **Meaning-making questions** (orienting intention with reflecting stance). The purpose of asking meaning-making questions is to explore below the surface of the client’s narrative. A meaning-making type of question orients both the coach and the client to what is underneath the situation and to the whole person. The coach’s stance is dialogic in nature, like an archeologist digging deeper into the client’s values, assumptions, feelings, and thinking to gain insight into the core of the presenting issue. The intended effect on the coach and client is a feeling of acceptance, which cultivates an expanded level of trust and intimacy within the coach-client alliance. The overuse of meaning-making questions, however, can result in a lack of focus for the coaching session and a sense of confusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System Level</th>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented</td>
<td>What makes this so important to you now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the impact on you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>What do other people close to this situation say about it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is important to them?

| Meta-contextual | What impact is this coaching having on you and our coaching relationship? |

3. **Catalyzing questions** (influencing intention with reflecting stance). The purpose of asking catalyzing types of questions is to test clients’ beliefs and actions by inviting them to reflect on the thoughts, feelings, and patterns embedded in their narrative for the purpose of evoking or provoking a change. The potential effect of a catalyzing question is to help the client experience a new awareness such as seeing new patterns of beliefs and behaviors. This opens space for the client to generate new possibilities toward his or her future desired goal. Notably, it is the catalyzing type of question that I characterize as a powerful question (consistent with ICF [2017] core competencies) because catalyzing types have the potential to help clients explore beyond their current thinking about the situation, themselves, and their desired outcomes. A possible risk of catalyzing questions is the client feeling judged. Care should be taken to not jeopardize the coach-client alliance. I often say to my students, “The coaching intervention (such as asking a catalyzing question) can only be as strong as the relationship.” Furthermore, catalyzing questions should not be disguised as leading questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System Level</th>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented</td>
<td>How do you know that is true?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is holding you back from making the change you say you want to make?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the benefit to you of making a change? Risk to you for making a change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you want instead? What is your ideal picture of the future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>If I asked people around you, what would they hope you would do now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What possibilities do other people or groups hope this conversation will generate for them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What implications could your decision to change, or not change, have on others?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As you reflect on our working relationship so far today, how is it going? What is our ideal picture of our alliance and how we work together?

4. **Mobilizing questions** (influencing intention with initiating stance). The purpose of asking mobilizing questions is to initiate a conversation with the client to construct a plan and identify actions, resources, and structures in service of their goal attainment. Furthermore, mobilizing questions help clients claim the learning they experienced during the coaching session by appreciating what is new and different in relation to the client situation compared to the beginning of the coaching session. The effect of mobilizing questions can be motivational in nature, helping clients build commitment to their action plan for achieving their desired goal. A possible risk of mobilizing questions, however, is premature closure on exploration of the desired future direction. For example, designing actions toward the goal can be damaging if actions are crafted toward an unrealistic or unwanted picture of the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System Level</th>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented</td>
<td>How motivated are you to step into your picture of the future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What actions might you take to achieve your goal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What resources or other supports are available to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>What barriers would get in the way of attaining your goal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who could help you get what you want?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-contextual</td>
<td>What have we accomplished together today that will be useful to us going forward?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How might we refine our process and celebrate successes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the SQF has not yet been empirically tested, I am glad to offer an anecdotal story about its use by continuing the story about the deer-in-the-headlights student I mentioned at the beginning of this article. During our supervision session, I educated him about the SQF. He later sent a follow-up
email that provided more insights about his challenges and how the SQF helped him overcome them. He acknowledged:

As you know, I’ve been struggling with this particular client and wondered if I’m not the right coach for this particular client. She seemed to have no real desire to reflect beyond the surface and maybe no real belief in the efficacy of what we were doing. I actually haven’t experienced a client like her. This is about me though, so my reflection has been either a) I’m experiencing an uncoachable client or b) It’s showing some lack of capability on my part and I’m not sure what the gap is.

He further shared that the SQF revealed a gap in his use of questioning:

The questioning model you’ve been using with me helped me realize I’ve been missing one piece of the puzzle - catalyzing questions. I do a good job asking questions about her situation and exploring the more deeply about the situation, then I go straight to designing actions. But that was a problem because she stayed stuck in her story. We never made any real progress.

So this time, I got up the courage to ask a few catalyzing questions. For example, she said that she “could be wrong.” In the past, I would not have known what to do with that kind of comment. Instead of feeling anxiety about not knowing what to ask next, your model flashed inside my head. I knew it was time for a catalyzing question, so I asked “In what way could you be wrong?” But still there was no shift. So I said, “Can I share an observation? I notice we’ve traveled down this same path a few times. I’m not feeling particularly helpful to you (smile). I wonder, what could I say now that might make a real difference for you?” I noticed a huge shift in our conversation and in her.

My student’s experience while learning and applying the SQF indicates that the framework may indeed hold insights not only about a broad science of questioning but also for developing the specific competency of powerful questioning. It follows that the SQF may help coaches gain critical self-awareness and confidence that helps them refine their craft.

**Three cautions when applying the Systemic Questioning Framework**

The SQF is proposed as a conceptual framework for use by coach educators and practitioners. When considering the use of the framework, three cautions are worth discussion consideration. First, the framework’s focus on questioning does not imply that coaches should only ask questions during coaching conversations. Instead, coaches also need to offers statements and perspectives during the coaching conversation, consistent with the ICF (2017)
core competency of direct communication. Using this approach, “the coach shares observations, intuitions, comments, thoughts and feelings to serve the client’s learning or forward movement” (marker 7.1).

Second, the framework outlines a broad science of questioning that includes the specific core competency of powerful questioning (classified as a catalyzing type of question in the SQF). Accordingly, the SQF suggests that coaches need to be aware and adept with a range of question types. Moreover, the framework’s focus on questioning also does not imply that a core competency of powerful questioning is more important than any other coaching core competency. Rather, questioning should be integrated with other core coaching competencies such as trust and intimacy, coaching presence, and direct communication.

Third, the SQF is neither prescriptive nor linear. Instead, it is iterative to support the dynamic nature of the coaching conversation. The framework serves as a mental model that coaches may access in the moment to help navigate the coaching conversation. To effectively and responsively shift the shape of their questions, coaches need to flexibly dance in the moment with the client, moving around the framework as indicated by the client’s needs and goals for the coaching conversation.

Last, it is important to emphasize that a client-centered philosophy is embedded within the Intention and Stance dimensions of the model. The coach remains in a state of curiosity during the coaching conversation and views the client as whole and resourceful.

**Implications for coach educators and practitioners**

The SQF is intended to help educators develop coaches’ professional judgment by enhancing coach awareness of the four types of coaching questions. Each type of question offers potentially different risks and effects for multiple levels of the coaching situation. Rather than a prescribed set of questions, the framework helps ground the coach in the impact they wish to have. When coaches are more connected to their desired impacts, the more the “right” questions will flow. In this way, application of the framework is anticipated to enhance coaches’ professional judgment during the coaching conversation, potentially increasing their confidence, competency, and presence in the moment.
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Leadership Coaching 2.0: Improving the Marriage between Leadership and Coaching

Ken Otter
California, USA

Abstract

This paper posits that in order for leadership coaching to realize its potential as a method for leadership development and to mature as a coaching specialty, a more robust engagement with the field of leadership and leadership development is needed. It describes the author’s journey of exploring the link between his knowledge of leadership and of coaching to enhance his own practice in leadership coaching. This description serves to highlight areas in need of attention in the present state of leadership coaching as it is presented in the literature. It concludes by positing that leadership coaching education programs are ideal locales to address those needs, specifically by convening a shared inquiry among practitioners, scholars and educators on identifying the important links between the fields of leadership and leadership coaching and helping coaches incorporate them as an integral part of their understanding and practice of leadership coaching.

Keywords: leadership coaching, executive coaching, coach education, leadership development

In this paper, I posit that, because leadership coaching is increasingly viewed as a viable method for leadership development and continues to grow as a coaching specialty (Ely, Boyce, Nelson, Zaccaro, Hernez-Broome & Whyman, 2010; Goldsmith, 2012; Maltbia, Marsick & Ghosh, 2014; Passmore, 2015), it would benefit from a more robust engagement with the field of leadership and leadership development (Korotov, 2016; Otter, 2014). I argue that such an engagement would contribute to the understanding, practice and development of leadership coaching skills. Given that the fields of leadership and leadership development are made up of many varied and contested features – concepts, definitions, theories, and research studies (Harter, 2006; Hunt, 1991; Heifetz & Sindler, 2005; Rost, 1993) – such an engagement is no easy task, yet it remains something important to pursue. I also argue in this paper that the challenging and necessary work to advance this engagement would benefit greatly by leadership coaching education programs, both inside and outside of academia, taking up the responsibility.
The Evolution of My Involvement with Leadership Coaching

After more than a decade as a family counselor and an educator, in the late 1990s I began teaching leadership in both academic and non-academic programs, during the time I was completing my doctoral studies in adult learning. My teaching drew upon both my experience and education in human development and learning and my practical experience in leadership.

In 2002, I was hired to help design and teach in a graduate program in leadership for working professionals in the San Francisco Bay Area. I quickly saw that my own experience in leadership was an insufficient basis for working with people with experience, needs, and contexts that differed from mine. To expand my knowledge, and to understand how to serve my students and clients better, I shifted my dissertation focus to researching leadership development. This shift exposed me to a wider range of perspectives, research, and theory on leadership and leadership development. By the time I completed my doctoral research, I had been working in the field of leadership education and development for well over a decade.

I made two critical observations during this time: first, that a single individual assumes different leadership roles in the course of their job, and second, that individual and team coaching are valuable as an integral part of leadership development.

With regard to the first observation about leadership roles, I saw that my students and clients, all working professionals and many of them managers at various levels in their organizations in the public, profit or not-for-profit sector, were navigating a complexity of roles and responsibilities and needing to practice leadership that was commensurate with this complexity. Those in law enforcement provide an excellent case in point.

In police work, officers are required to practice different forms or approaches to leadership, depending on the context. For law enforcement professionals, there are at least three forms of leadership in play. In emergency situations, effective command leadership is required. As a manager within the agency, a more leader-centric and authority-based leadership is expected. As part of a stakeholder group in a city, such as a member of a task force or someone developing standards and policies in police work, where the individual may not have role authority, a more adaptive or collaborative leadership approach may be warranted.
Not only are there different leadership theories and research studies associated with each role, each requires a different mindset and differing capacities and skills. For example, the type of communications skills needed during a citywide protest is different than the type needed in a working task force on how to improve policing crowds in such protests. As someone charged to develop leadership competency, when sought by police officers wanting to improve their various forms of leadership, I found my theoretical knowledge of leadership and leadership development helpful in identifying and developing in my clients the different skills needed to enact leadership in these dynamic and varied contexts.

Second, I saw the value of individual and team coaching, as either adjunct to training and education programs (Allen & Roberts, 2011) or a primary pathway (Lee, 2017; Stroul & Wahl, 2013). Identified in the literature as a viable strategy for leadership development (Allen & Roberts, 2011; Day, 2000, 2012), coaching as a useful component of leadership was evident to me in the experiences of students and clients in the various leadership development programs in which I participated. Moreover, as the director and a faculty member in the leadership studies department at my university, I found receiving coaching myself to be helpful in my own practice of leadership as well.

Because of these experiences, examining coaching as a viable path for leadership development became a new academic and practice focus for me.

Three Directions and Four Questions

Just as my academic study of leadership and leadership development served my educational and facilitation practice, an academic study of coaching promised to serve my coaching and coach education practice. This quest has taken on four distinct but interrelated directions, all of which inform this paper in significant ways.

The first direction I took was to read books and articles on leadership coaching in both trade and scholarly publications. Second, although my experience in counseling, education and leadership provided me with some skills in coaching, to develop my practical and theoretical knowledge as I aspired to meant that I would need to complete a formal education in coaching. Therefore, I completed a certificate program in Executive and Organizational Coaching. Along with enhancing my understanding and competency in coaching, this study led me to a lot of questions about what leadership coaching is and what it could be.
This experience ignited my third direction, to embark on a research project to understand more about what leadership coaching is and how to develop it as a viable coaching specialty. This third direction has catalyzed this paper and its focus. Yet, as the reader will quickly see, the other two directions – reading and study – are implicated in this paper as well.

Wanting to find out how coaching can best help people working in dynamic, varied and complex contexts, like those in law enforcement, I again turned to the literature. As a fourth direction, I embarked on a systematic review of the literature in leadership coaching and wrote about my findings in a conference paper presented at the First Annual Columbia Coaching Conference in 2014 (Otter, 2014).

In my review of the leadership coaching literature, I discovered three significant issues. First, as mentioned, leadership coaching is increasingly being used as an adjunct to education and training programs in leadership, or as a stand-alone method for leadership development (Ely, Boyce, Nelson, Zaccaro, Hernez-Broome & Whyman, 2010; Goldsmith, 2012; Maltbia, Marsick & Ghosh, 2014; Passmore, 2015), with, however, little research on its efficacy. Second, leadership coaching is largely understood to be about coaching people in designated leader roles and positions; as such, it is often used interchangeably with executive coaching (Korotov, 2016; Maltbia, et al., 2014). I found little in the literature on how to provide coaching for people who also practice leadership beyond their organizational role or without a formal role, and in contexts of collaboration. Third, with few exceptions (Anderson, 2013; Korotov, 2016), there is relatively little engagement with the scholarly field of leadership and leadership development in the coaching literature (Beattie, Kim, Hagen, Egan, Ellinger& Hamlin, 2014; Ely et al., 2010). All three of these discoveries propelled me to learn more about how leadership coaching could expand its scope and effectiveness to serve as a useful pathway for leadership development in varied, dynamic and complex contexts.

From these discoveries came four key questions. The first was, How might I better understand what leadership coaching is, how to be effective in it, and how to contribute to its development as a specialty? In response, I began researching the current state of leadership coaching described both in the literature and in the experience and philosophy of practitioners. I discovered that there were relatively few empirical studies on the effectiveness of leadership coaching in clients, how it gets developed in practitioners, and what role practical and theoretical leadership knowledge plays and should play in leadership coaching.
Although scientific research is not the only means to develop leadership coaching as a viable method for leadership development, in my experience as a counselor and an educator, it offers much to the practical art of leadership. In fact, in the maturation of other helping professions, such as medicine, attention to developing a scientific knowledge base through empirical research and theory development is key to improving its practice (Noordegraaf, 2007). For professional coaching to match its credibility with its growing popularity, I join the voices of many who advocate a more scholarly agenda in studying its practice (Korotov, 2016; Maltbia et al., 2014).

The second question that surfaced in my preliminary literature review was this: *Is leadership coaching just another name for executive coaching, making it simply about coaching designated leaders in formal roles and positions?* In my review of the literature in leadership coaching, the terms *leadership coaching* and *executive coaching* appeared to be conflated and used interchangeably. For example, Maltbia et al. (2014) define executive coaching as “a developmental process that builds a leader’s capabilities to achieve professional and organizational goals” (p. 165). Morgan, Harkins and Goldsmith (2005) define executive coaching as “a precision tool for optimizing the abilities of leaders” (p. 23).

I found that this type of leader-centric understanding of leadership predominates in the literature of leadership coaching. Leadership coaching is commonly described as a personalized, customized, or individualized process to support and facilitate leadership development of *leaders* in organizations (Goldsmith, 2012; Kets, de Vries, 2006). Ely et al. (2010) define leadership coaching as “a relationship between a client and a coach that facilitates the client becoming a more effective leader” (p. 585). Ting (2006) describes it as a process “to help leaders understand themselves more fully so that they can draw on their strengths and use them more effectively and intentionally, improve developmental needs, and develop untested potential” (p. 15). Common to these definitions is the emphasis on individuals already in leadership roles.

Exemplifying this prevailing view in a recent review of the leadership coaching literature, Korotov (2016) comments, “Common sense suggests that leadership development should be about helping people be better leaders” (p. 2). This definition of leadership coaching as supporting people in leader roles and positions runs the risk of conceiving leadership as merely “that which leaders do” (Rost, 1993), rather than a distinct social activity that differs from other related activities, such as managing and governing (Dunoon, 2008; Otter, 2017).
Decoupling leadership from actions of individual leadership and from managerial activities, and expanding the understanding of leadership beyond the traits and behaviors of individual leaders to leadership as an activity that is a property of a social system, has been a rich vein of research and theorizing in the leadership field for more than two decades (Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling, & Taylor, 2011; Grint, 2010; Harter, 2006; Hunt, 1991; Kezar, Carducci & Contreras-McGavin, 2006; Komives, Longerbeam, Mainella, Osteen, Owen, & Wagner, 2009; Rost, 1993; Uhl-Bien 2006; Uhl-Bien, Maslyn, & Ospina, 2012). With a few notable exceptions (Courville, 2103; Passmore, 2015), there is surprisingly little of this robust theory present in the leadership coaching literature. For example, there is little discussion about differentiating between leadership as a role or position and leadership as a process or activity (Anderson, 2013; Grint, 2010), nor is there attention to differentiating between leader-centric and relational forms of leadership (Day, 2000; Otter, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Developing capacities in leaders and in those preparing to be in leader roles is definitely an important area and deserving of much attention. But so, too, is developing leadership capacities in people when leadership is enacted as an activity or process, when people are not in leader roles and positions but participants in a team or a collective of some kind (Denis et al., 2012; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Although some attention is being paid to team leadership (Britton, 2013) the times seem particularly ripe for leadership coaching to give more attention to developing leadership that is plural, shared, and collective.

The following vignette of one of my coaching engagements offers an apt illustration. A director of parks and recreation in a small university town sought leadership coaching to address an area of his job where he felt neither competent nor confident. In contrast to his sense of competence and confidence in leading his department, he struggled when required to engage various stakeholder groups in regular community meetings and planning processes. As the coaching unfolded, he ultimately recognized that the competencies that work well as a manager leading his department were not the ones needed in these community-involved processes. When working with multiple stakeholders with divergent loyalties, needs and interests, it was hard for him to find solid footing. In working with him, I found it helpful to have an understanding of leadership that encompassed a range of forms and expressions, each requiring different capacities and skills.

This understanding resulted in certain lines of inquiry. For example, I asked him how he understood his experience and expectations in practicing
leadership in each domain, as well as what he thought his strengths and limitations were in each. From there another line of inquiry unfolded around what he thought leadership should look like for him and for others in these community planning processes. This inquiry included exploring the capacities and skills he needed to develop in order to practice leadership in these settings more effectively.

By experimenting with different actions, such as facilitating conversations between people in conflict, staying with ambiguity and uncertainty longer, and helping others develop basic interpersonal and dialogue skills, the client recognized that he needed to bring different leadership understanding and competencies to each of his domains of practice. He also learned that the community planning process work required more preparation and attention from him than the straight managerial leadership role he assumed in his office.

The third question that emerged for me from my review of the leadership coaching literature was this: Assuming more engagement with the field of leadership and leadership development would advance the practice of leadership coaching, how might this need be addressed?

Although leadership coaching is presented in the literature as an organizational intervention to enhance capacity in leadership for individual leaders and leadership teams (Nieminen, Biermeier-Hanson & Denison, 2013; Korotov, 2016), the literature largely focuses on various theories that make up and inform the coaching process, such as theories of human performance, adult development, psychology, communication, organizational culture, and business (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2014). There is surprisingly little engagement with leadership theory (Anderson, 2013; Nieminen et al., 2013; Korotov, 2016). For example, in their evaluation of leadership coaching, Ely et al. (2010) identify leadership coach qualifications to include graduate behavioral science training, business awareness, and, in order to have credibility and expertise, knowledge of or experience in the client's industry. However, there is no mention of knowledge about leadership and leadership development theories.

Among leadership development scholars it is widely recognized that how one defines or understands leadership determines what gets attention in the developmental process (Day, 2000, 2012; Komives, Ritch & Mengel, 2009).

For example, if leadership is largely an influence relationship among collaborators, as Rost (1993) claims, then one focus of development would be
to cultivate the relational and social capital in the enterprise so that shared influence can take place. In this way, the working definition of leadership informs leadership development designs and outcomes (Boaden, 2006; Day & Antonakis, 2010; Otter, 2012). For leadership coaching, Korotov (2016) underscores the importance of grappling with defining “what leadership is (or expected to be), and how it should be manifested” (p. 2). He goes on to describe the multiple and contested definitions of leadership among leadership scholars and practitioners alike. When leadership coaches and leadership coaching researchers do engage the literature in leadership theory, they must contend with this plurality of definitions, compounding the challenge for coaches to integrate the leadership knowledge base with the coaching knowledge base as part of their practice. Perhaps this is one source of practitioner hesitation in engaging the leadership literature. The question then arises: What part of this vast field of knowledge should be included? This is a question I return to a little later on.

Another possible source of coaches’ lack of engagement with the research and theories of leadership and leadership development is the view that the preferred knowledge base for leadership coaches is their personal and professional experience as leaders themselves or from working with leaders (Morgan, Harkins & Goldsmith, 2005). This familiarity could be sufficient if the experience of the coach matches well with the needs of the client and the organization. However, the complex, turbulent and uncertain conditions in which organizations exist seem to require a wider repertoire of leadership constructs, processes and skills, which may include but also may go beyond a leader-centric view of leadership or the necessarily limited experience of the coach (Heifetz, 1994; Jarche, 2014; McGonigill & Doerffer, 2011).

Furthermore, the proliferation of leadership articles, trainings, and education programs that present a wider band of leadership perspectives and methods results in a diverse repertoire of leadership practices in organizations (Ciporen, 2008; Otter, 2012). For example, thousands of managers have been educated in the adaptive leadership model developed by Ron Heifetz and colleagues at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, which presumes that leadership can be enacted from anywhere in the system, not just from those in role authority (Daloz Parks, 2005). Being exposed to this perspective could open up fruitful lines of inquiry for coaching clients, as it did for me in the coaching example described above.

As coaches, we can advance the leadership development of people who might have a different background, perspective, and practice of leadership than
we do – and who are enacting leadership from both designated leadership and non-leadership positions – if we are exposed to a wider range of leadership perspectives and models. On this point, Passmore (2015) asserts that familiarity with different leadership perspectives can serve as a guiding framework for coaches to provide “a language for developmental conversations and offer [clients] a heuristic to take into the office for their future development and decision making” (p. 13).

Because familiarity with the full repertoire of leadership theories and perspectives is an unrealistic task for leadership coaches, the question then becomes how to evaluate the various theories about leadership in order to develop more leadership literacy in coaches. This leads to my fourth and last set of questions that emerged in reviewing the literature: How do leadership coaches increase their engagement with the field of leadership and leadership development? What knowledge from those fields should we include? Who convenes this conversation, and who should be included?

Certainly, more research into how coaches practice leadership coaching is one avenue to address these questions. Another is convening conversations among practitioners and scholars such as that which took place at the 19th Annual International Leadership Association Conference, in which leadership scholars and coaches engaged in a shared inquiry on the questions of what the fields of leadership and leadership development offer to leadership coaching (Otter, 2017a). One theme that arose is the importance of differentiating between leadership as embedded in the actions of a designated leader or leadership embedded in the activity of a collective or team. The question that followed this discussion was, What difference, if any, does differentiating between assigned leadership and collective or team leadership make in the coaching process?

Such conversations can only go so far in taking up the responsibility to engage the set of questions that have arisen. What is needed is a sustained conversation on these questions, which I believe could take place in leadership coach education programs in both academic and non-academic settings. For example, these programs can help coaches think about and evaluate the range of leadership theories and practices in relationship to the needs and aspirations of their clients, and they can help identify research topics and questions for coaches to pursue. Indeed, according to Maltbia and Page (2013), coaching programs have the responsibility to engage students in “the multidisciplinary body of knowledge regarding professional coaching” and to facilitate critical
conversations that help coaches think about, theorize, and evaluate coaching models (p. 12).

Such programs would engage leadership coaching education in particular approaches and theories related to professional coaching, as well as increase engagement with the fields of leadership and leadership development and the research that informs them. This exploration should not be limited to academic programs, but should also take place in non-academic coach education programs as well.

**Improving the Marriage of Leadership and Coaching in Leadership Coaching**

The purpose of this paper has been to affirm the value of leadership coaching as either adjunct to leadership training and education programs or as a primary pathway in leadership development while arguing that, for leadership coaching to fulfill this promise, it not only needs more empirical research on its efficacy, but it must also expand its view of leadership beyond those that predominate in the literature in leadership coaching today; in addition, it must engage the practical and theoretical knowledge already developed in the field of leadership and leadership development. How can this happen?

Giving more attention to the practical knowledge about leadership in leadership coaching is an important job of leadership coach education programs. Not only can the exploration and evaluation of the knowledge from the field of leadership and leadership development inform leadership coaching through curricula and program development, class conversations, coach supervision and mentorship, but such programs can also convene dialogues at conferences and seminars as well as foster linkages among research, theory and practice toward a more sophisticated understanding of what makes leadership coaching effective, and how best to conceptualize, practice and develop it.

For the first graduate course on leadership I taught 20 years ago, my class description stated, “The practice of leadership invites people to bring forth their unique, authentic and creative gifts in response to the emerging needs of their particular world.” This perspective continues to reflect why I work in this field today. Although I have relied heavily on leadership education to support people in their leadership learning, I am increasingly drawn to transfer some of this investment to leadership coaching practice, education, and research. Just as my first course announcement invited graduate students into an exploration of what is possible for learning leadership, I invite coaching practitioners, researchers
and educators to explore expanding leadership coaching by enhancing understanding of leadership as a whole so that leadership coaching becomes an equally promising pathway in people’s varied and diverse leadership learning journeys and the world these journeys benefit.

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Coaching: Meaning-making process or goal-resolution process?

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Abstract

Two schools of thought exist about the purpose and process of coaching. One school of thought holds the strong belief or assumption that the purpose of coaching is to change behaviour through a goal-directed approach. The counterview has the underlying assumption that coaching is a meaning-making process, a shared journey that may or may not result in behavior change. These two approaches have different ontologies (definitions of the nature of reality) and epistemologies (explanations of how we come to know what we know). They are underpinned by worldviews rooted largely in either modernism (goal-resolution focus) or postmodernism (meaning-making). These schools of thought are explained in this paper, after which the paper examines a study that examined the lived experience of coached executives. It concludes that goal-resolution and meaning-making can co-exist. It appears from the study of coached executives who were interviewed through a constructivist grounded theory study that what is actually occurring in coaching is that meaning-making precedes goal-resolution. The implications of this for coaching education are that coaching education could address the ontology and epistemology of knowledge and methodology. This may increase an understanding of the coaches’ own worldviews and consequently they would be more mindful of the impact and potential bias of the methodological choices they are making in their coaching practice.

Keywords: coaching, goal-resolution, meaning-making, postmodernism, modernism, worldviews

This paper begins by sharing the need for theory development with the field of coaching. It contextualizes how the role of reflexivity, with particular reference to reflecting on our worldviews, is needed in research and in our coaching practice. Two articles are reviewed, which reflect different schools of thought about the purpose and definition of the coaching process. One school of thought shares the strong belief or assumption that the purpose of coaching is to change behaviour (Grant, 2012), while the other school of thought has the underlying assumption that coaching is a meaning-making process, a shared journey that may or may not result in behavior change (Stelter, 2016). These two approaches have different ontologies (definitions of the nature of reality) and epistemologies (explanations of how we come to know what we know).
They are underpinned by worldviews rooted largely in either modernism or postmodernism. These two worldviews as they relate to coaching are briefly explored in this paper.

The paper then examines a study in which I, Cunningham (2017), explored the lived experience of coached executives and I document what the clients experienced coaching to be, not what theorists postulate that it “should be.”

The paper concludes that despite the debate over coaching definition as to whether coaching is a goal-resolution or meaning-making process, it is in fact both. Meaning making and goal resolution may co-exist in the coaching process with the suggestion from the coached executives interviewed that meaning making comes first.

Need for theory of coaching based on lived experiences of coached executives

I was motivated to conduct a study on the lived experience of coached executives with the primary purpose of developing theory. Coaching by nature is located in a multi-disciplinary field and consequently draws on a multitude of constructs and concepts from various disciplines. It draws its influence from diverse fields such as psychology (De Haan & Duckworth, 2013; Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010; Passmore, 2009; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007), organizational development (Egan & Hamlin, 2014), leadership development (Kahn, 2011; Stout-Rostron, 2014), learning and education (Cunningham, 2014), and management (Kahn, 2011).

It appears that authors and researchers tend to describe the contribution of the discipline or field to coaching based on their own training and background. Therefore, researchers who tend to have a psychological background will often cite the psychological foundations of coaching (Grant, 2006; Kauffman& Scolar, 2004; Passmore, 2009), whereas those with a stronger business background will focus on the contextual aspects such as organizational development (Kahn, 2011; Peterson, 2006; Stout-Rostron, 2014). Authors do tend to acknowledge the multi-disciplinary nature but the emphasis varies in terms of their own dominant background, orientation and education.

Coaching theory may be shifting in focus from the original 1980s transmitter generation (Brock, 2008), which took theories and adapted them to coaching. Of the 17 transmitter-generation influencers on coaching, 8 (41.2%)
were from business, 4 (23.5%) were from psychology, 3 (17.6%) were from sports, and 2 (11.8%) from philosophy (Brock, 2008, p. 308). However, much of the theory is still developed on the basis of the researcher’s background, training and worldview without the philosophical position being acknowledged by the author.

Methodology flows from the philosophical orientation of the researcher or the practitioner coach. Guba and Lincoln in Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 105) state that “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm.” They define a paradigm as a “basic belief system or worldview that guides the researcher not only in choice of method but in ontological and epistemologically fundamental ways.” The ontological question would focus on the perceptions of reality, while the epistemological questions would focus on the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participant and the reader of the research. The methodological question would focus on how this information can be found. The same principles would apply to the practicing coach except that the focus would be on the coach and the coachee and the methodological question would focus on the choice of methods used in the coaching process.

A key driver for the future of coaching research is the need to develop coaching theory based on evidence. Ultimately theory is the development of perspective and the creation of a mental model of the phenomenon to be understood. Theory development encourages the advancement of knowledge and aims to move the field’s thinking forward, providing new connections and discussing the practical implementations of these connections (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Theoretical contribution is often evaluated on two criteria – the originality of the contribution and the usefulness of the contribution. The research I conducted is useful in that it presents evidence of the experience of goal-resolution and meaning-making in the coached executive’s perceptions. This research could facilitate and potentially resolve the tension that coaches may feel between being focused on goal attainment and wanting to step into a reflective mode. This would be useful to both coaches and coach educators.

We are seeing that the very answer to the question “Is coaching goal directed or a meaning-making process?” is influenced by one’s ontological view of the world, combined with one’s experience and training. We thus find a situation where coaches and theorists defend their approaches without necessarily making explicit their ontological and epistemological views of knowledge. The debate then becomes a debate of methodology, as opposed to an understanding of a different worldview.
The role of reflexivity

I believe that coaches and researchers need to be aware of their philosophical worldview and able to articulate it. As an example, I stated in my research:

I will begin by exploring the ontological question of how I perceive reality. My philosophical orientation has been influenced strongly by the work I do and the area I am researching, namely business coaching. I have been coaching for close to 20 years and in my experience, I have found people see their world from different perspectives and that their experiences influence the language that they use to describe their world and this in turn influences their world. An example, an adult who was bullied as a child might have the word “bully” in his vocabulary and when in the corporate world power politics are at play, he might revert to describing the manager as a “corporate bully.” In contrast, someone who has not had this experience might describe the manager as narcissistic based on their training in psychology and react differently. The same experience gets labelled differently and evokes a different behaviour. There are, therefore, multiple realities and perceptions.

A philosophical orientation that supports my experience is that of symbolic interactionism. The very approach of coaching is congruent with this philosophy as it is believed that by talking and thinking about one’s life (being reflective and interacting with someone), one is able to construct and give meaning. Coaching is a space for self-reflection and allowing oneself to view a situation in a certain way or to challenge one’s views about a situation.

Coaching becomes part of the interpretive space or process. The paradigm of symbolic interactionism (that believes we create meaning through interaction) is therefore an appropriate tradition or theoretical perspective to underpin this research. (Cunningham, 2017, pp. 22-26)

This reflexivity from researchers needs to be encouraged as a critical part of the research and writing journey. By stating the philosophical assumptions that underpin the study, the purpose is not to minimize the value of one type of study over another but to encourage and appreciate alternative modes of knowledge enquiry. We should be transferring this awareness of philosophical assumptions from research to practice. Our education of coaches should include orientations to different philosophies. By making our worldview transparent, we can become aware of potential biases and through reflective processes such as coach supervision become more self-aware, attuned practitioner coaches.
Modernism and Postmodernism

Bachkirova (2017) argues that our worldviews influence the way in which we write, research and practice coaching. These worldviews are not always clearly defined and separate but rather move along a continuum. A key defining factor is the ontology incorporated in the worldview – that is, how the nature of reality is defined. Modernism tends to see the nature of reality as containing a pre-existing pattern that can be discovered. Postmodernism sees social reality as chaotic, fluid and ever changing without a master plan. The worldview that the author, researcher or practitioner holds influences the lens or philosophical position in which knowledge is perceived differently. Modernism will desire a rational, logical argument presented on the basis of facts. The postmodern lens will view the world or knowledge as composed of multiple realities, with no one explanation more true than other explanations. Postmodernism will see that the knowledge is true for all who accept the presented facts but that there is no one universal truth (Bachkirova, 2017; Neuman, 2010).

Bachkirova (2017) summarizes the co-existence of what she terms “epistemological attitudes” by stating that both could learn from one another. Postmodernists could become more precise – a lesson from modernists – and the value of self-reflexivity used by postmodernists could be used by modernists. The way this would play out in research would be that modernists would believe that there is a clear cause-effect relationship. As a result of ‘x’, then ‘y’ would occur. For example, specific coaching interventions would lead to a set of outcomes in coaching. In contrast, the postmodernist stance in coaching would encompass the view that coaching is a process of joint meaning-making, of co-creation, and that reality emerges. Not all qualitative studies are conducted in the postmodernist tradition. Yet the rich, descriptive focusing on context makes most such studies fall into the worldview of postmodernism.

I will now look at two papers which demonstrate a particular worldview. The content of the papers focuses on the purpose of coaching and the process of coaching, with a particular reference to the role of goal-resolution and meaning-making. The first paper is a study by Anthony Grant published in 2012. The second paper is a conceptual paper written by Reinhardt Stelter in 2016. These are briefly described and are then followed by a commentary about the two papers as they relate to a worldview. The papers were chosen as it was very clear to see the philosophical underpinning guiding their papers. Both authors are well-respected academics and researchers. In an attempt to locate the articles in relation to modernism and postmodernism, I would like to
acknowledge that the worldview is located on a spectrum and my interpretation is open to a different viewpoint.

**The purpose of coaching – goal-resolution or meaning-making?**

In 2012, Anthony M. Grant wrote a paper entitled “An integrated model of goal-focused coaching: An evidence-based framework for teaching and practice.” He positions the paper by stating that “goal theory per se has much to offer coaching research and practice” (Grant, 2012, p. 146). The paper reviews the body of literature on goals and goal setting, commenting that at the time of the research there were relatively few papers that articulated an explicit link between goal theory and coaching. Goal theory is discussed in detail, from timing of goals, types of goals, and goal hierarchies to the implications of goal neglect. The paper discusses the different professional bodies and how the use of words such as ‘goal’ and ‘outcome’ are common. He states that “all these definitions of coaching are essentially about helping individuals regulate and direct their interpersonal resources in order to create purposeful and positive change in their personal lives” (Grant, 2012, pp. 148-149). He then states that as such all coaching conversations are explicitly or implicitly linked to goal focus. The paper systematically develops an integrative model of goal attainment.

Grant acknowledges in this paper and in an earlier paper by Grant, Curtayne and Burton (2009) that well-being is part of the coaching process. In 2009, he had conducted coaching using a cognitive-behavioral solution-focused approach, within a randomized controlled study in which coaching was conducted by professional executive coaches. The results showed that, compared to controls, coaching enhanced goal attainment, increased resilience and workplace well-being, and reduced depression and stress (Grant et al., 2009, p. 396). Grant reports on a study he conducted where participants were asked to identify their desired outcome for the coaching relationship and then rate the degree to which they had reached this outcome. The fact that the study uses language such as “degree to which the outcome” was reached suggests that coaching can be measured in quantifiable scores. The paper makes a further argument that the achievement of behavioral goals has a positive impact on individuals’ workplace performance. He states “To enhance the goal directed nature of the coaching program, the GROW model (Whitmore, 1992) was used to structure each coaching session” (Grant et al., 2009, p. 399).

If we look at Grant’s (2012) paper, it is clear that he builds up a strong, logical argument, drawing on a range of theories and pointing to existing
structures such as definitions by professional bodies. The paper reports on a study he conducted in which a cause-and-effect relationship is assessed using a scale from 0 to 100%, and participants are asked to rank their answers. This is more modernist than postmodernist in orientation, as are randomized controlled studies. Ives and Cox (2012) also provide a strong justification for a goal-focused approach.

In contrast, Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, and Bazerman (2009) suggest goals have gone wild and there is a systematic side effect of over-prescribing goals. Perhaps given the relentless focus on business goals, it is suggested that the coaching space might be needed as it could provide a much-needed reflective window in our hectic world (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2013).

In contrast to Grant et al. (2009) and Grant (2012), Stelter (2014) has developed a construct that he labels “third-generation coaching.” He describes third-generation coaching as a journey where the coach and coachee collaboratively and jointly generate meaning in the conversation. He contrasts this with first-generation coaching, in which the objective is to assist the coachee to reach a specific goal, and further compares this to second-generation coaching, where the coach assumes that answers reside within the client or coachee and that they (the client) know the solutions to their challenges. An example of first-generation coaching would be the GROW model (Whitmore, 2007), which in its very acronym indicates goal as a focus – Goal, Reality, Options/Obstacles and Way Forward/Wrap up (GROW). A second-generation approach could include the “time to think” approach, which many coaches have used. The “time to think” approach strongly embraces the philosophy that wisdom and answers lie in the client (Kline, 2015). The trend of using positive psychology and a strengths-based approach in coaching may philosophically be situated in this second wave, where emphasis is on the good and strengths in people. However, increasingly, positive psychology is moving away from this viewpoint. Kauffman (2006, pp. 221-222) states that she “must emphasize that positive psychology is not interested in pretending all people are paragons of virtue, maturity, and mental health.”

In the meaning-making approach, Stelter (2016) believes that identity development is vital and the meaning-making process will result in (1) a strengthening sense of coherence in the coachee’s self-identity; and (2) integrating past, present and future into a whole. The reflection and renewed understanding for the client or coachee would be about (1) his or her own experiences in relation to a specific context; and (2) specific relationships, coordinated actions with others and the processes of negotiation in a specific
social situation. Meaning is essential because people assign specific meanings to their experiences, their actions in life or work and their interactions. What is important in relation to Stelter’s point about understanding is that things will begin to appear meaningful when people understand and when they make sense of their way of thinking, feeling and acting (Stelter, 2007).

The postmodernist stance is that effects cannot necessarily be allocated proportionally and that uncertainty and ambiguity are in fact the reality. The following quote from Stelter (2016), who adopts a postmodernist approach, captures the essence of uncertainty:

A coaching agenda that focuses exclusively on goals and quick solutions will fail to meet the needs of postmodern, late modern and hypercomplex societies, where the challenges and demands on the individuals are changing very rapidly. I encourage the reader to focus less on specific goals and instead invite their coaching partner to linger on thoughts and feelings and to make time for reflection. In our time, we have lost the idea of simply having time. Coaching has to be a dialogue from where we reinvent the concept of just lingering, of having time to be on a journey with another person. It is a journey into the unknown, where neither the coach nor the coaching partner clearly knows the destination or the route. It is a journey of discovery into relatively unknown territory, where both parties are travel companions, and neither knows anything for sure about the road ahead. (Stelter, 2016, p. 63)

Neither goal-resolution or meaning-making but both

This paper concludes by examining a study that investigated what coached executives say about their experience of coaching (cf. Cunningham, 2017).

Research that has been based on the client’s perspective is in the minority. Bush (2004) studied the client’s perceptions of effectiveness in executive coaching. Critical moments in the coaching experience were researched and one of the significant findings was that an increase in insight and realization was valued by the clients (Day, De Haan, Blass, Sills, & Bertie, 2008; De Haan, Bertie, Day, & Sills, 2010). A useful distinction is made that whilst a majority of studies have collected views from coaches, considerably fewer have given a voice to the coachee’s experiences (Passmore, 2010). Some studies from the client’s point of view include those of Augustijnen, Schnitzer, and Van Esbroeck (2011), which, based on interviews with coached executives, developed an executive coaching model. The two central variables of the model are: (a) the relationship based on trust between coach and coachee; and (b)
openness to coachee introspection. Elston and Boniwell’s (2011) study found ways in which women through coaching identify how they may use strengths and gain value in the workplace. Gray, Ekinci and Goregaokar (2011) concluded that coaching was used for predominantly personal benefits rather than to build business-oriented competencies. Roche and Hefferon’s (2013) overarching finding was that the debriefing conversation about a strengths-based assessment tool was influential in moving the participants to act. Another significant finding was that the debriefing heightened the participants’ understanding of their strengths and how to better utilize them.

This is a brief summary of a part of the Cunningham (2017) study but it lets us hear the voice of coachees or clients. It is, after all, for their purpose that coaching exists.

The study did not specifically focus on the question “Is coaching a goal-directed or meaning-making process?” It was an exploratory study using constructivist grounded theory methodology and asked the participants to talk about their coaching experience. The research questions guiding the study were:

- What is the lived experience of coached executives?
- Based on the lived experience, what theory about the coaching process emerges from the evidence?

To obtain rich data through interviewing, it was important that the participants in the research were able to speak openly and without restrictions. They also had to be able to tell their stories in their own voice and evolve their ideas in an emergent and reflective manner. Charmaz (2014) has developed the terminology ‘Intensive Interview,’ which describes a contingent conversational style of interviewing that allows for the ebb and flow of dialogue in a conversational way. This allows the participant in the research to share what they consider important in contrast to answering guided or semi-guided questions.

In much qualitative research, the interview guide is based on the conceptual framework derived from the literature review. However, this is not the case with grounded theory interviews, which need to gather data from respondents that is ‘uncontaminated’ by existing theory. The theory that emerges from grounded theory is grounded in the data collected, not in previous literature. One can conclude that interviewing skills on the part of the researcher vary, and surmise that unstructured interviews require greater skill because they have less literature guiding them. The interviewer thus needs to be
sensitive to subtle nuances and body language cues in respondent replies (Cunningham & Carmichael, 2017).

I thus wanted to find out how the coached executives experienced coaching. The methodology was a phenomenologically oriented constructivist grounded theory study. The study was primarily designed to follow Charmaz’s (2014) approach to grounded theory, but, since elucidation of experiences was being sought, it had a flavour of phenomenology, but without the depth of a normal phenomenological study (Cunningham & Carmichael, 2017). The findings of the overall study will be articulated in other publications, but the purpose of this paper is to highlight one finding: namely, how executives experienced goal-setting and meaning-making in coaching.

The context within which the research took place was that of business executive coaching. Coaching was described as a relatively young field as recently as 2014 (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014). Coaching is considered one of the fastest growing human resource (HR) development techniques. These techniques are used both internally and externally by organisations (Ciporen, 2015).

The study had a total of 17 participants.

Companies (via their HR directors, learning and development managers or talent managers) that offered coaching to their executives were identified purposively (Roulston, 2016) and contacted to obtain permission to approach executives who had already been coached within their organisations. The main selection criterion was that executives had experienced coaching (regardless of who the coach was and regardless of industry). Data was analysed after each interview in order to revise the next interview guide. Eleven executives from seven organisations were interviewed in the first round of interviews. This was supplemented with six coaching students sharing their reflective journal about their coaching experience. Ten coaches had coached the executives. One coach had coached two people. Only two coaches were male. The coaches had different training, credentials and backgrounds. They were spread across various industries and across the country.

The coached executives consisted of five males and six females.

The first interview was kept broad and open-ended, asking questions such as: “Please tell me about your experience of being coached”, “What was the context of the coaching intervention?” and “Please describe the relational
aspects between you and your coach.” Probes were along the lines of, “…and what happened next?” and “What kinds of things did you reflect on…?”

A finding from this constructivist grounded theory study, in terms of the coaching process, was that it appeared that one of the practices of the coach was offering a different lens to the executives. The consequence of the sharing of a different lens was that it allowed the coached executives to see things differently. Comments documented included how the coach had encouraged them to look at things through a different lens or have a different insight. Some executives (Executive 7 and Executive 9) stated: “The big positive for me was the whole concept of making you think differently about things” and “It challenges you, it helps you think through, opens up your mind, you look at things differently” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 73). Another executive said,

Coaching has been massively helpful and I have grown in leaps and bounds as a manager, I think in terms of how I manage people and how I just see things. It makes me look at things from a different perspective (Executive 5). (Cunningham, 2017, p. 73)

Another executive (Executive 7) said: “I think the lasting part of it [coaching] for me is that I now think a little bit differently.” Coached executives used several analogies or phrases about seeing things differently. Statements included: “I had blinkers on,” “hit a light bulb,” “been an eye opener” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 73).

Many spoke about the sense-making or meaning-making process and one executive (Executive 11) summed this up as follows:

When I have gone in to see her, just feeling totally confused and my brain full of mush, just in terms of thousands of things I am worrying about or thinking about and then just having really powerful experiences through her ability to ask, to translate my thoughts and to help me process what I am experiencing. So the end result has been huge clarity and huge support and huge confidence actually…So to have somebody for whom my world made sense and she can affirm my way of being, has been really, really helpful. (Cunningham, 2017, p. 85)

The coached executives did not use the phrase ‘meaning making’ or ‘sense making’ but stated it in context.

Executive 6 stated: “She helped identify with me all the layers of the decision – you as a person as a whole, you as a person and your goal, in your career, recommendations, relationships – whatever. Everything had to make sense [bold added for emphasis] for me to take that decision, at an emotional
level. It was like all different layers.” Executive 6 also commented on understanding self in relationship to context and said, “So if I went into a coaching relationship again, it would give me another layer of understanding about myself and the way I interact with the world” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 82).

Executive 5 said,

> My coach is brilliant; she really gets to the bottom of things, really why I do certain things or why I react in a certain way and makes me look at them from different perspectives. And a lot of what I find every time you know you go to a session and you kind of hit a light bulb moment and you go like “wow” you know, it’s like so logical. I have gone through a process whereby I have looked at serious things, there may be another way or thought about it differently but I am where I want to be and it is that conscious decision through thinking. (Cunningham, 2017, p. 87)

The consciousness of decision making definitely contributes to the enhanced understanding. Executive 6, expanding on Executive 5’s words above, stated, “I think it [coaching] is around focus, mindfulness, you as an individual have to have enough knowledge to see it but that kind of mindfulness around pausing enough to really analyze things” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 87).

Executive 1 said, “I think it [coaching] would be an intervention to assist on improving your understanding the role that you are in and imparting your thinking into the organization” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 89).

This expanded the insight from self-reflection to sharing within the context. This cluster of awareness, understanding and meaning-making were the first responses the executives gave when they were asked about their coaching experience. They would later go on to list other benefits but, in terms of order of outcome, it would appear that this cluster was necessary for the other benefits to take place.

Based on the executives’ stories and their lived experience, for them the coaching process begins with understanding. Understanding encompasses many factors – understanding preferences, understanding context, and understanding emotions, values, history, and multiple other considerations. Once understanding is present, it moves to making meaning, which is personalizing the understanding to one’s own identity and own life choices. It could also be described as personalizing the level of awareness to the context. An example might be an individual becomes aware that they are an introvert in preference. Meaning-making comes from understanding what it means to be an introvert in their particular context, which might be a very extroverted sales-driven
environment. This leads to a person’s thinking differently and only after that behaving differently. The insight achieved in the example above might be along the lines of ‘I am ok. I doubted my ability because I am not like them but I just do it differently. I can sell but I sell using my introvert style. I just need my manager to understand this.’ The subsequent behavior would be communicating with the manager. This behaviour can be displayed in many different ways – some of which are illustrated in the diagram shown in Figure 1 below. These different behaviours and actions include better managing stress, better managing time, and enhanced interpersonal relationships, but this is not an all-inclusive list of behaviours.

Executive 8 summarised the difference between behaviour and thinking by saying: “It was just like an opportunity to press the pause button on the operational side of the business and look more towards nurturing ‘what do I think’ – because I had sort of stopped thinking and was more acting” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 92).

Executive 6 confirmed the importance of meaning-making. As she put it, “Everything had to make sense for me” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 92).

This is reflected in Figure 1 – in order to shift from the process of understanding to the process of thinking differently, meaning-making has to take place. I would suggest that many companies send people for coaching to achieve changed behaviors but changed behaviors will be sustainable and lasting when the process described above is followed in detail. Behavioral change happens after steps 1, 2 and 3, as reflected in Figure 1.
This study found that the coachees stressed thinking differently as the most important part of coaching. It included meaning-making as a key part of the process and it led to behavior change which could be part of goal-resolution. Therefore, regarding goal-resolution and meaning-making, it is not either/or but rather an answer with both/and. It is important to not start to pursue meaning-making as a goal. A modernist orientation might be to set a goal of meaning-making but a postmodernist view of meaning-making would be different. A postmodernist view would see meaning-making needing a space of free exploration. It requires a sense of not knowing, a space for emergent discovery, a place without a predefined agenda. Meaning-making can co-exist alongside goal attainment. To encourage such meaning-making, Jinks & Dexter (2012) suggest coaches might want to safeguard the space for coaching clients to experience and reflect on the rewards and enjoyment linked to goal attainment. They go on to say “If an unremitting relentless focus is on goal achievement, then the coaching profession as a whole may be facilitating and reinforcing the compulsive behaviour of goal pursuit as an end in itself” (Jinks & Dexter, 2012, p. 101).

An important reflection is who says what and who are we listening to? Are we developing our theories according to our existing way of viewing the
world and adapting known theories to coaching or are we challenging the way we think, write, practice and teach as coaches? Are we listening to the evidence, to the coachees/clients?

Having reflected on the question: “Is coaching a goal-resolution process or is it a meaning-making process?” we should ask: “What are the lessons or questions that we can leave for institutions that are training and educating our future coaches?”

- Do we teach the ontology and epistemology of the knowledge that we share with students?
- Is the focus on the methodology sometimes at the exclusion of understanding the worldview and philosophy that underpin it?
- Are we developing discernment and critical thinking in our students about the methodologies that they use? And if we say we are doing so, what are we doing to develop this distinctive critical thinking?
- Are we teaching our students or are we learning together in a collaborative, contingent, emergent way?
- Where is the evidence for the theories that we teach?

The paper began by pointing to the need for theory development in the coaching field. It discussed the need for researchers and practitioners to be reflective and aware of their worldview. Modernism and postmodernism were described. Two papers were explored – Grant (2012) and Stelter (2016) – and briefly analyzed in terms of how their worldviews impact on their conclusions about goal-resolution and meaning-making. I ended the paper by sharing a study I completed in which one of the findings demonstrated that meaning-making needed to precede goal-resolution. This was based on the lived experience of coached executives.

The findings could be summarized as follows. Based on a constructivist grounded theory study rooted in evidence, the coaching client finds the coaching process valuable as it increases understanding and facilitates meaning-making, which leads to thinking differently. As a result of changes in the viewing lens and in the thought process, new behaviors result. These changed behaviors may link to predefined goals or new goals that evolved through the meaning-making process (Cunningham, 2017).
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Book Review


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The burgeoning of coaching in organizations over the past 20 years has generated questions about the field’s legitimacy, that of its professionals and of the activity itself. Typical questions include: What are the impacts of coaching on individuals, teams, and organizations? How are effective coaching interventions designed? What is a legitimate background for a coach? Even, are there any risks in using coaching?

This Handbook orchestrates the various academic contributions that have addressed to date such questions. 40 key issues are then discussed and organized into 6 parts: I. Positioning coaching as a discipline; II. Coaching as a process; III. Common issues in coaching; IV. Coaching in contexts; V. Researching coaching; VI. Development of coaches. Most, if not all chapters, are written by authoritative figures of the field who put their work into perspective with the Handbook’s objectives of furthering the establishment of coaching as a discipline. Overall, I would like to stress two major features of the Handbook that particularly resonated with me.

Orchestrating the Wild West

First, the Handbook does a nice job of honoring and organizing into a coherent body the multiplicity of voices in the coaching field. Drawing on experts across a wide range of disciplines, it offers a thorough account of the mainstream and normative perspectives in coaching while providing an avenue for more analytical and critical approaches. Several chapters propose structuring frameworks to explore different coaching practices and distinguish between various tools, approaches, models, roles, etc. In particular, Bachkirova’s distinction between modern and post-modern approaches in coaching is especially helpful as it nicely positions the different practices and perspectives in coaching such as the coach’s attention, the role of the coach, the
coaching relationship, etc. While normally this multiplicity leads to a portrayal of the coaching profession as a Wild West, where the so-called lack of consistency is associated with eclecticism, ambiguity, and confusion, the Handbook embraces the richness of the coaching kaleidoscope. In earlier work, my co-author Jean Nizet and I (2012) challenged the negative connotation of ambiguity in coaching by offering an alternative interpretation. Building on Merton’s functionalist analytical framework, we suggested that this perceived ambiguity might reflect the inherent multiple functions that coaching offers: from explicit (such as empowering individuals) to latent functions (such as pacifying social relations in organizations), to potential dysfunctions (such as scapegoating certain individuals in the organizations). In the end, we portray coaching as an ad hoc entanglement of multiple functions that vary across contexts and for people, and whose seductive power lies in these inherently malleable functions.

Confronting the Elephant in the Room

Of course, as a scholar interested in what some might consider the “hidden” or “dark sides” of coaching, I was particular attracted to a handful of commonly neglected conversations given attention in this book. To name a few: “The Key Discourses of Coaching” (Chapter 3 by Simon Western), “Coaching for Social Change” (Chapter 10 by Hany Shoukry), “Physicality in Coaching: Developing an Embodied Perspective” (Chapter 14 by Peter Jackson), and “Researching the Coaching Process” (Chapter 32 by Adrian Myers). While, as exposed by Western, the conversation often takes a technical perspective by focusing on the micro-practice of coaching with an emphasis on skills, competencies, and goals, these chapters unveil macro issues, such as the discussion of how social, ideological, and spatial factors shape (and normalize) the practice of coaching today. In brief, they confront the “elephant in the room” by inviting reflection on the interests that coaching can serve. In this context, Shoukry’s chapter connecting coaching, oppression, and emancipation is especially noteworthy. Building on the research into coaching as a practice of control and discipline, this chapter identifies several factors that contribute to the neglect of critical issues in coaching, including power. Shoukry likens the adaptive nature of coaching to a 21st century society characterized by an individualistic self-improvement paradigm, a coaching body politic essentially preoccupied with serving a performance-centric organizational agenda, and the prevalence of an individual focus in coaching at the expense of systemic thinking. Similarly, Western’s distinction of four discourses in coaching suggests some coaching discourses might be more likely to support an authentic
development of the individual rather than contributing to aligning behaviors to fit organizational norms in organizations.

Also unveiling under-discussed topics in coaching, Jackson calls our attention to body, embodiment and physicality. Especially, he focuses on physiological states in coaching, reviewing several practices that help both coach and client tune in to somatic experience: integral coaching, somatic coaching, ontological coaching, etc. Implicitly emphasizing the being dimension of coaching, Jackson’s embodied perspective invites us to look at coaching as a lived space, beyond a set of tools and methods. I see this as an encouragement to further consider the spatial dimensions in coaching, thus echoing a few conversations started in this handbook. Western (Chapter 3), for example, describes coaching as an “experiential space” for the soul/psyche to speak, “a liminal space” where we listen to “the heartbeat of the conversation rather than only its content” (Western, 2012, p. 155). Along the same lines, Korotov (Chapter 8 – Coaching for Leadership development) emphasizes the potential transitional (Winnicott, 1953) function of coaching. Other scholars have also suggested to consider the specificities of this boundary space, neither totally inside, nor totally outside organizations, that potentially generates power dynamics (Fatien Diochon, Louis, Paiva, Van Hove, 2017). They call for raising awareness on the challenges specific to coaching at the interface, including the multiple hats that coaches wear from firefighter to spy or loudspeaker (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2016).

In conclusion, by orchestrating the Wild West of coaching and confronting some elephants in the room, I believe that this Handbook makes a significant contribution to strengthening the discipline of coaching, especially because it includes but goes beyond the techne of coaching, to tackle its political dimensions. And we can only wish for this Handbook to help all coaching stakeholders embrace the field’s complexity.

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Book Review


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The Sage Handbook of Coaching brings research on diverse aspects of coaching together in a single volume, reflecting the limits and possibilities of coaching, both as a practice and as a field of study, at this time. Happily, the editors avoid the potentially negative consequences of imposing an ideological narrative on a field still in the process of finding itself, resisting the natural desire to define coaching at the outset. Instead, they recognize that there is currently no unified definition of coaching and embrace the opportunity to stage “an open inquiry into the nature of coaching, along with an examination of whether, and to what extent, such a unified definition might be possible” (p. 5).

The philosophical underpinning for the uncertainty that orients the Handbook is coherently articulated in Bachkirova’s opening article ‘Developing a knowledge base of coaching: Questions to explore,’ in which she contrasts (somewhat ironically, given postmodernism’s suspicion of binaries) modern and postmodern notions of truth, arguing that pragmatism might ultimately set us free from the seemingly insurmountable gulf that separates the two. With a pragmatic orientation in place, Bachkirova then situates the knowledge base of coaching in relation to other, related disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy and biology.

These multidisciplinary influences on coaching are also taken up by Simon Western in his chapter ‘The key discourses of coaching.’ Western distinguishes between four discourses shaping coaching today, highlighting the extent to which the word ‘coaching’ masks considerable differences between what coach practitioners, drawing on different discourses, actually do. To what extent can a life coach focusing on spiritual wellness really be said to be engaging in the same practice as a leadership coach focused on managerial effectiveness? I think this is a question many coaches struggle with as they differentiate and integrate knowledge from different discursive traditions,
pragmatically addressing client needs as best they can, and Western does a good job of bringing conceptual clarity to this question.

While these chapters offer rich opportunities for reflective thinking about coaching and its contexts, others simply bring together the research on a given topic, itself a considerable feat, given that the coaching literature is not contained within a few key journals, but spread across a wide range of publications serving different communities of practice. These literature review articles also serve the important role of evaluating the quality of the research findings, which I found especially helpful with regard to Adult Development and Neuroscience. When most coaches (at least in my experience) pick up their knowledge from webinars that serve the dual purpose of educating and selling, a more sober analysis of the validity of various experimental findings is welcome, especially when this is done with a full appreciation for both intuitive understanding and the importance of ongoing practical experimentation in the face of inconclusive evidence.

Some of the more interesting chapters challenge the status quo of current coaching practice. Hany Shoukry’s chapter on ‘Coaching for Social Change’ calls for the critical pedagogy that is now commonplace in teacher preparation programs to be incorporated into coach training and development. In practice, this would mean coaches develop more social, cultural and political awareness, critical thinking, and self-reflectiveness, particularly around notions of power and privilege. Shoukry provides a strong ethical rationale for coaches to embrace not only individual concerns but also larger social imperatives.

Another challenge to the status quo comes from Gordon Spence and Stephen Joseph in their article ‘Coaching for post-traumatic growth’ which, as the title suggests, focuses on “the suitability of using coaching to help people grow through traumatic experiences” (p. 399). Long considered a big no-no as a result of a widespread fear of conflating coaching and therapy, the authors argue that “coaching has an important role to play during some of the most difficult periods of a person’s life” (p. 399).

The volume closes with a reflective chapter titled ‘Discipline, profession and industry: How our choices shape our future,’ a meditation on the state of the coaching … well, exactly how to finish that sentence is what the chapter is about. Is coaching a profession, and if not, why not? Is coaching a discipline, and if not, why not? These questions may seem solely academic (in the pejorative sense of the term), but for those of us who have embraced ‘coach’ as an identity, and ‘coaching’ as a scholarly interest, they are important. The
volume, then, for me at least, ends on a note of pathos as, despite the 750-odd pages dedicated to exploring the various dimensions of coaching, it is still not clear whether coaching has really come of age. It is still, perhaps, the optimistic step-child of psychotherapy, or the coercive tool of management. It still doesn’t quite know what it is, or where it fits. While that can be seen as part of its aberrant charm – its inherent category-defying interdisciplinarity – it leaves actual coaches and real-life coaching scholars struggling to carve out a space for themselves.

How that struggle plays out ultimately depends on us, with the authors of the chapter, Annette Fillery-Travis and Ron Collins, concluding that

> Whether it [coaching] becomes a fully developed profession or emerges as a distinct academic discipline remains, as with any practice, in the hands of its practitioners. It will depend on the direction they collectively take and on the impact they have on their clients and their businesses as a result. (p. 741)

We each, then, have a responsibility, to ourselves and to each other, to advance the theory and practice of coaching in a direction that aligns with our values and honors the ongoing developmental needs of our clients. How that collectively plays out over the next twenty years is anyone’s guess, but I have little doubt that *The Sage Handbook of Coaching* represents a pivotal moment in that emerging narrative.

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Book Review


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As the title of the book suggests, Adam Kahane attempts to answer the question ‘How do people who are fundamentally different in their goals, values and beliefs work together despite their differences?’

The conventional view of collaboration, he claims, “requires us all to be on the same team and headed in the same direction, to agree on what has to happen” (p. 1). But what do we do when even that first step seems impossible? How do we move forward with others when we can’t seem to agree on even the most basic things?

As the lead facilitator on group processes aimed at resolving long-standing political impasses around the world, including in post-apartheid South Africa, Kahane has a vast wealth of experience with seemingly intractable problems. His text is sprinkled with fascinating first-hand accounts of his work with governments, NGOs and private corporations, all of which led him to develop his theory of “stretch collaboration” (p. 1), which he contrasts with conventional collaboration in the following ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional collaboration</th>
<th>Stretch collaboration</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focuses narrowly on collective goals and harmony of team</td>
<td>Embraces both conflict and connection within and beyond the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insists on clear agreements about the problem, the solution and the plan</td>
<td>Experiments systematically with different perspectives and possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries to change what other people are doing</td>
<td>Enters fully in to the action and is willing to change ourselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Kahane’s central claim in the book is that conventional collaboration may work when a team is homogeneous and agrees on desired outcomes, but in today’s increasingly complex and uncontrollable world, such situations are rare. As a result, we have to learn how to collaborate differently.

Before addressing the question of how to collaborate, though, Kahane asks us to consider when to collaborate. Collaboration, he believes, must be a choice, informed by criteria, with four possible outcomes.

1. We Collaborate when we can change a situation but can’t do so unilaterally
2. We Force when we can change a situation and can do so unilaterally
3. We Adapt when we can’t change a situation and can bear it
4. We Exit when we can’t change a situation and can’t bear it (pp. 18-23)

The choice to collaborate, then, is a pragmatic one.

We adapt or exit when others are more powerful than us and so can force things to be the way they want them to be; we force when we are the more powerful; and we collaborate only when our power is evenly matched and neither of us can impose our will. (pp. 22-23)

In an increasingly complex, interconnected world, power is often limited by forces beyond our control, making collaboration necessary but difficult. Agreement about basic assumptions and desired outcomes is less likely and we consequently feel stuck, trapped by forces beyond our control, and unable to move forward.

We see these other people’s values and behaviors as different from ours; we believe they are wrong or bad; we feel frustrated or angry. Although we know that we have to work with them, we wish we didn’t. We worry that we will have to compromise or betray what we believe is right and matters most to us. In these situations, although we see that we need to collaborate with those people, we don’t see how we can do so successfully. (p. 10)

The answer, Kahane argues, is a new form of collaboration that does not require agreement at the outset. Instead, it involves “finding a way to move forward together in the absence of or beyond such agreements” (p. 35). It requires giving up control, believing that by doing so we will ultimately get more of what we want and less of what we don’t want – and where even what we end up wanting may look different to what we previously imagined.
To engage in this new form of collaboration we need to make three fundamental shifts in our approach to collaboration.

First, we need to recognize that there is no such thing as ‘the whole,’ and consequently no such thing as ‘for the good of the whole.’ Often collaboration is premised on this idea, that together we are serving the whole, and that’s what really matters. Instead, Kahane argues, there are multiple wholes – wholes within wholes – or holons. Recognizing that there are nested and overlapping holons within larger holons means multiple, often competing interests, not just the single interest of ‘the whole,’ must come together through the responsible exercise of power and love (for a more complete treatment of this idea see Kahane’s previous book, *Power and Love* (2010)). What is particularly interesting is Kahane’s emphasis on the generative cycle of power and love. It is impossible, he claims, to hold these two polarities at the same time – we must instead move between them, cycling or looping, being supremely sensitive to when we are over-invested in one or the other.

The second requirement is that we get comfortable with the idea of moving forward without a plan. When people don’t agree, like or trust one another, they are unlikely to commit to a shared, long-term, large-scale plan. Instead they may just be willing to take a small step in a shared direction and see how that feels. And then maybe one more. This modest, tentative, and ultimately realistic approach to shared action means resisting the natural desire to see doom and gloom when things go wrong and sunshine and light when things go well.

We need to maintain our equanimity in a conflictual, uncomfortable situation where we don’t know how things will turn out, or when, or even if we will succeed. (p. 81)

This ability to be comfortable with uncertainty is what the English poet John Keats meant by ‘negative capability,’ and is equally important when communicating with diverse others. Kahane distinguishes four ways of talking and listening, two of which reenact existing realities (Downloading and Debating) and two of which enact new realities (Dialoguing and Presencing). To co-create across difference requires getting comfortable with all four ways of talking and listening.

Finally, the third and perhaps most difficult requirement of all is that we focus less on changing others, and more on changing ourselves. In the absence of agreement and hierarchy we are simply one co-creator among many. We may be able to influence, cajole, or inspire others, but when we fail to do so the
temptation is to blame others for not being influenced, cajoled or inspired, rather than ourselves, for not being sufficiently influential, cajoling or inspiring.

Whenever we find ourselves distracted by others, we need to come back to the simple question, what must we do next? (p. 97).

And unless we are going the route of non-collaboration – forcing, adapting or exiting – our only viable option is to look for ways that we can be different.

Kahane concludes his book with a six-week, do-it-yourself course of exercises aimed at developing the reader’s ability to meet the requirements of stretch collaboration. Coaches, especially those working with teams on seemingly intractable issues, will likely find these helpful.

References


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Book Review


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After 30 years of coaching executives, New York City-based Lolly Daskal, owner of Lead From Within, wrote The Leadership Gap: What Gets Between You and Your Greatness, which articulates her process of utilizing archetypes for leadership development. Based on her own observations, practical experience, along with research and case studies, this book explores seven distinct archetypes as well as how to leverage leadership gaps that, in her view, impede leadership greatness. As a companion to the book, she also offers an assessment for the reader to both find their archetype and be aware of their own gap.

The 7 archetypes have names that are intuitive: The Rebel, The Explorer, The Truth Teller, The Hero, The Inventor, The Navigator and The Knight. As I first started reading, I was anxious to find out which archetype I would fall under and if I would be surprised by the answer. More than one felt true and appealing, which is often the case with such assessments, but there was no ability to straddle two. Ultimately, we have a little bit of each, but a strongest inclination in one, with something to learn from the others.

Whether to do the assessment prior to reading or after becomes a choice of chicken versus egg. Assessments can be fun and informative, but often, unless the answer resonates, they are forgotten. Daskal’s thought is that if groups can take the assessment together, then there might be an opportunity for meaningful group discussion over concepts and stories that are relatable.

Daskal utilizes several methods to both describe the archetype and gap. She starts with the articulation of the archetype, followed by a story or examples of a person that embodies the archetype. She then notes the key to success for the archetype along with how one might cultivate it. The real key to true understanding of the main archetype, in her view, is explaining and naming...
the gap. The discussion of the gap archetype, things to be aware of and how to leverage the gap in a positive way is the opportunity for real leadership development. Each chapter ends with famous people who are examples of leaders with the particular archetype, along with follow-up questions for learning.

Some of the best examples in the book are her personal client experiences, which give a coach an opportunity for a fresh view and analysis. For example, the story of the sushi master Jiro for The Inventor archetype gives the reader a tangible story that is not only memorable due to the price tag of a meal at Jiro’s restaurant, but effective because of the focus and vision he uses for his sushi perfection (pp. 122-126). The specific examples help give a tangible picture of an exemplary archetype. The personal stories are powerful because they are both interesting and relatable.

Less effective, but still poignant for me as a reader, are stories plucked from the news, which in some cases feel too familiar. The story of Dr. Omalu and his work with concussions of NFL football players, told in a popular 2015 movie *Concussion* with Will Smith, explains the archetype, The Truth Teller (pp. 74-80). The story of Dr. Omalu as a truth teller is classic: telling the truth at all costs, while noble, causes disruption. The better story, in my view, is the ‘gap’ to this archetype, because it talks about a real client and what happened when suspicion takes hold of a person (pp. 84-85).

Another example, widely discussed, is The Stanford Prison Experiment, also a 2015 film of the same name, by Stanford professor Philip Zimbardo, which is used to discuss The Bystander, The Hero’s leadership gap (pp. 110-112). The failed prison experiment clearly demonstrates how a person could become a bystander, rather than a hero, due to peer pressure, and thus turn “a blind eye and deaf ear on actions that may be abusive.” (p. 112) Other examples include a modern approach to research, including internet research, stories and personal experience, which gives the reader an opportunity to find different ways to understand and best assimilate the material.

With so many developmental tools available in the coaching profession, it begs the question, which tool is best or even, why yet another book and companion assessment? For some, the system discussed in the book is intuitive not only with the titles for each archetype and gap, but in the sensical explanations. In the leadership context, it’s an opportunity for a different kind of discussion about leadership, particularly with the gaps that both counterbalance the strength but may be a deviant ‘blind spot’, crushing
potential leadership. *The Leadership Gap* is a pleasurable and quick read, with a fun assessment. Depending on the client, the coach can use this book as a tool for discussion either individually or as a group and even use the book as suggested reading for thought provoking conversation and individual contemplation and development.

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