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Professional development in coaching: towards a dynamic alliance of narrative and literature to transform the learning process

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Abstract

Coaching draws on disciplines such as psychology, management theory, and organisational development. From these disciplines, models that seek both focused solutions to problems and those that aim to effect transformative learning have been developed. My work with students has revealed some dissatisfaction with performance coaching models such as GROW (Whitmore, 2009) and a desire to connect more with their imagination and creativity. I offer a case study of working with mature students employed by an international software company, who used a unique approach to coaching that combined narrative and literary techniques to produce coaching projects that offered solutions to work-based problems.

Key words: coaching; classic literature; organisational learning; stories; coaching models

Introduction

Coaching has emerged as one of the most significant approaches to the professional development of managers and executives in the business world. As Gray (2006) makes explicit, much of the literature on coaching is drawn from the discipline of psychology and proposes various psychotherapeutic interventions. While accepting that the field of psychology has had the greatest influence on coaching, I agree with Drake (2007) that we should be creating stronger ties with narrative psychology given the key role of narrative in people's lives. In coaching, the coachees' stories matter: stories should be told and re-told so that they become less of a defensive shell behind which a coachee can hide and more of a way of revealing an understanding of oneself in order to live fully and freely.

In my work with master's students learning to be coaches, I have noted the benefits that positive psychology and a thorough familiarity with adult learning development theories (theories rooted in psychology) have had on students. I have assessed many critically reflective projects that navigated the established theoretical and knowledge-based coaching materials to guide their projects. However, students admitted challenges in "telling the story" of themselves and their organisations and often found themselves at an impasse in relating how they addressed organisational problems through coaching. If, as Drake (2007, p. 283) argues, the goal of a coach is to articulate how to "think narratively in order to be present to clients and their stories in new and effective ways", students need

support in harnessing the art of thinking narratively and possibly also in engaging with the art present in literary works, especially classics, so that they can be the best coaches possible. Calvino (2002, p.4) states that reading the classics will give us a deeper understanding of ourselves and our times:

The classics are books which exercise a particular influence, both when they imprint themselves on our imagination as unforgettable, and when they hide in the layers of memory disguised as the individual's or the collective unconscious. For this reason, there ought to be a time in one's adult life which is dedicated to rediscovering the most important readings of our youth.

This paper will introduce the students whom I encouraged to think narratively when constructing their projects. I provide an overview of how narrative research can be used with coaching students. I use the term "thinking narratively" from Polkinghorne (1991) as he describes the concept of configuring the actions and events of one's life to make them more meaningful. I then demonstrate how to use classic literature in an amalgam of narrative coaching and literature with coaching students, giving examples of the writers the students were introduced to and how the students engaged with their ideas. Ultimately, my argument is that if we use the art present in literary classics such as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Lampedusa's *The Leopard* and Franklin's *The Way to Wealth* with their original ideas, fluent and affecting text and well developed awareness of a character's position – we can help our students make independent and critical contributions in their coaching connections.

My purpose in writing this paper is to explicate with choice examples extracted from my own practice how combining narrative coaching and using literature can help coaching students bring an "effective change methodology" (Grant, 2014, p. 19) to bring more meaning to their working lives. They should be able to, in turn, translate this methodology effectively to others.

Aim and context of study

I work in the field of professional practice and work-based learning and focus my teaching on helping students create projects that explore how they, in turn, can help colleagues address organisational change, how they can facilitate a deeper critical awareness of personal and organisational challenges and how they can advise management on hiring and retaining staff. Recently I have been working with students from a range of international organisations, supporting them in their coaching inquiries at master's level. Their studies involve writing up a 12,000 word project on how they can use a coaching intervention to improve their own and their organisation's performance. I have encouraged students to integrate literature into their projects in the past, and, in doing so, have noted measurable improvements in their writing skills. By literature, I mean essays, fiction and non-fiction works. A writer's choice of text structure, grammar and lexis can be explored by students in order for them to improve their own writing skills. Furthermore, there is much we can learn from essays and fiction. The work I chose to introduce to this particular group of students was intended to help them tap into important workplace issues: the works in themselves highlight ways of addressing these issues.

The improvement of writing skills is of paramount importance to me because it is a major means of assessing student criticality. If a coaching student, or indeed any student, cannot express himself or herself with clarity, precision and confidence, the underpinning research and study has been obscured and their finished product becomes greatly diminished. My coaching students, who were senior sales people from a global software solutions company, were often thwarted in relating how they addressed organisational problems through coaching: their struggle was to create logical, simple prose unfettered by jargon and superfluity. Prompted by my earlier work with professional doctoral students in helping them to articulate their oratorical autobiographies, I decided to use a combination of narrative

coaching and literature to support these coaching students to articulate their experiences, insights, values and skills.

The study

I met the students in November 2014 via an IT platform that permitted us to see and hear each other. The students were part of a distance learning course, and they were dispersed over three continents. All eleven of these students were male and all were highly regarded sales executives working within a fast-paced and driven environment. Our two-hour workshop sessions for a course that ran over one year were held every two months and interspersed with “conversations” on our Moodle space about student drafts, reading, ideas, philosophy and general collegiate exhortation to “keep up the good work”. Some of the students did not speak English as a first language but spoke three or four other languages, and their English was very good. Yet among both the native and non-native English speakers there ran a common thread. In varying degrees, their prose was punctuated with business clichés and stock expressions such as “moving forward”, “touching base”, “flavour of the month”, “client centricity” and “deliverables” that demonstrated the all too common business rhetoric characterised by obscurity and euphemisms. Few professionals of course can escape jargon, but a tutor’s job is to help students recognise good writing and avoid the stereotypical politician’s art of saying a lot but meaning nothing. I asked the students to filter their work (and crucially the texts they were using to substantiate their arguments) through six simple questions:

- Is the work readable?
- Is the work well structured?
- Does the work speak to your experience?
- Is the work interesting?
- Is the form of language it uses appropriate for its purposes?
- Do you feel inspired after reading it?

My aim was for students to reflect on the language they used as well as the language they read. They read excerpts from *Walden* from Henry David Thoreau (2007), the 19th century American philosopher who spent a year alone at Walden Pond writing ruminations on life, particularly on natural phenomena, good husbandry, nonconformity and society, which would subsequently be recognised as vivid accounts of a reflective way of representing and acting in the world. Thoreau’s message to his readers was to “wake...up” (p.1872), and his reflections on the link between man and universe seemed to me to be much more compelling than exploring yet another reflective model. I believed that reading about Thoreau’s stay on Walden Pond and his thoughts on reflecting in the woods on society, civic responsibility and the universality of life would have greater resonance for them than another look at Kolb’s (2014) learning cycle or Schön’s (1987) reflective practitioner model. Excerpts from the students’ interviews and Moodle conversations are presented here after seeking their permission. All work is anonymised.

Doing narrative research

Like coaching in business, narrative in research has gained an increasingly high profile. As Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2008, p.1) identify, unlike other qualitative research perspectives:

narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation, or the best level at which to study stories. It does not tell us whether to look for stories in recorded everyday speech, interviews, diaries, TV programmes or newspaper articles; whether to aim for objectivity or researcher and participant involvement; whether to analyse

stories' particularity or generality; or what epistemological significance to attach to narratives.

The protean nature of narrative research is what can help us to understand our world. Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2008) suggest that power, positionality and reflexivity lie at the core of narrative research. Narrative coaching can then be used to examine such issues as feeling disempowered at work or serious misunderstandings among team members: our stories of experience can be understood through a coaching lens. Early on in the course, one of the students, Jeremy, wrote about his experience in trying to develop a coaching model for transformative change. His focus was on certain aspects of learning theory as well as different models of transformative change he had read about. Frankly, it was a dull read. I asked him to put himself at the centre of the account. When he rewrote his account, he discussed his background, his family and his values. From reading about one theorist after another with no sense of any connection to these writers, Jeremy put himself into the centre of his story and was able to use the theorists solely to substantiate his observations: his story became meaningful to him and to the reader.

Because narratives are the "means of human sense-making" and we are all "imbricated in narrative" (Squire, 2008, p. 43), it helps to encourage students to analyse the key themes in their stories of themselves and of their organisations. As Boenisch-Brednich (2002) claims, the more we tell a story, the more structured and polished our narratives become: these narratives become the means by which coaches as students gain insight on human behaviour in order to work more effectively with clients. In emphasising how important making meaning through storytelling is for people, Drake and Lanahan (2007, p. 40) claim that employees should see organisations as a set of individual and collective stories:

A key role of leaders, particularly in the management of change initiatives, is to help their organization *shift* the stories it tells about itself. As part of this process, it is important to understand the critical role of objective in defining and understanding a person's – or an organization's – motivation and ambition.

These authors maintain not only that successful business coaches are story-driven, but that successful companies articulate their mission and values in a narrative sense as well. Instead of focusing on problem solving, story-driven organizations focus on the job of "connecting employees to sources of meaning, identity, and purpose" (p.46).

In Warren Bennis's (1989) investigation of the key ingredients of leadership success, he makes the point that business is a dominant cultural force and has social, economic and political forms. He urges organisations to be redesigned along more "humane and functional lines" so that professional life can be ameliorated (p.178). Twenty-seven years on, have organisations heeded Bennis's advice? The evidence that some organisations know that their primary resource is their people is borne out by these students being supported to work on their coaching degrees. Companies are paying to hear their employees' stories and recognise that it will be their stories that contribute to the overall organisational story: "the organization itself should serve as a mentor. Its behaviour, its tone, and its pace instruct, positively or negatively, and its values, both human and managerial, prevail. If its meaning, its vision, its purposes, its reason for being, is not clear [...] in effect, it's flying blind" (p.186). My coaching students were sensitive to the flaws of their company, but their loyalty was never in question. In fact, they seemed to perceive themselves as part of a whole, and therefore integral to their organisation's well-being. Another student, Carl, inspired by Benjamin Franklin's almanac (2007) shared this rationale of why he was producing his own almanac for fellow staff at the company:

In the course of my master's studies, I happened to really get into the research on coaching methodologies in order to improve management practices especially around transformation. The idea of an almanac to share my experience, story and learning came to my mind when reading Benjamin Franklin's work. In the 18th century many ideas were published this way and at times this simple and pragmatic way of communicating to the masses was highly appreciated. I decided to reproduce it for my fellow managers and coachees. The intent of the almanac is to create reflection around coaching in a light-hearted and interesting way.

Space will not permit me to share an excerpt from the almanac, but I can provide a flavour of the student's ideas. Like Franklin, Carl came up with an inspirational thought for the day such as "coaching focuses on future possibilities, not past mistakes". He then built a coaching session around exploring the coachee's story, taking in how he or she could have done something differently.

This became a highly innovative project which married the art of thinking narratively with creating an artefact from the genius and wit of one of the stalwarts of American literature. Carl's almanac prompts coaches and coachees in his organisation to use stories in order to reflect discursively on our past, present and future (Drake, 2007). Moreover, Carl was responsive to Franklin's complex, fine prose, telling me afterwards that the pithy nature of Franklin's observations helped him to rein in his own natural verbosity.

It is important to point out at this juncture that not all students respond to the same texts with enthusiasm. It is incumbent upon the educator to provide a range of texts, adapted to a variety of tastes. In my own practice I have strived to look for texts that complement my students' professions. For example, with a cohort of students whose profession was dog training I introduced Jack London's (1994) *White Fang*. With a group of professional pilots, I used Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's (2000) *Vol de Nuit*. As tutors, we must not be prescriptive in our choice of texts: what is paramount in the model I am proposing is the act of reading literature and of drawing links between this reading and one's professional practice.

Literature in coaching

A good business coach needs to be oriented to business strategy and to understand the complexities of organisations (Grant and Hartley, 2013). He or she needs to be aware of the process of reflection in the sense of bringing one's ideas to consciousness (Cain, 2009). There is a wealth of literature that explores the crucial role that reflection plays in coaching (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Ben-Hur, Kinley and Jonsen, 2012; Grant, 2014). In considering mentoring, which has root similarities to coaching, Cain (2009) reminds us that we must be ever-alert to our practice, particularly on reflections on the dynamics of power: we should take pains to develop an awareness of the power dynamics that are invariably present in human relations. Many of my coaching students have found resonance in Cavicchia's (2010) observation that too many business conversations are characterised by defensiveness and a lack of listening. Students are introduced to models that support the reflective process, a process captured succinctly by Boud, Keogh and Walker's (1985, p.19) definition: "Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over, and evaluate it.". This processing phase, or *listening* to the shape of a situation or event, is an essential aspect of learning. We, as educators, are urged to *listen* to the learner and to "provide access to particular devices which may be of use" (p.38). Moon (1999) has gathered a range of definitions and models related to reflection from well known writers such as Boud (1989), Schön (1987), and Brookfield (1987) and has demonstrated their unified focus on exploring what can be done with reflection: there is no consistently held view concerning the role of reflection, but there are vital questions about the nature of reflection and the need to recognise patterns of reflective practice

in all learning models. To varying degrees, all models appear rooted in Dewey's (1910, p.12) ideas about human thought: "Demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection."

The basis of any successful coaching dialogue is reflection, which according to Brockbank and McGill (2006) is an exchange that will promote learning. When students engage in reflection, they familiarise themselves with the tenets of reflective dialogue inherent in transformative coaching. They recognise, in their own words, the need to "suspend judgment", to "understand" the client's world, to have "intentional dialogues". Students interrogated Whitmore's (2009) GROW model and Egan's (Turnbull, 2009) model of helping. Although I never introduced my students to Turnbull's (2009) CARE model, and therefore have no empirical evidence on which to base my analysis here, I think this model could be used as a successful tool in the coaching arena. Its emphasis on preparing people to "live successfully in an unknown future" (p.5) has a particular significance in general for salespeople caught up in the rapidly moving maelstrom of marketplace culture, consumer behaviour and commercial practices. Although Turnbull's (2009) focus is on young people and those working with young people, she raises interesting questions that I believe could be reinforced by guiding our students towards the rich and complex stories inherent in their own lives and those that abound in literature.

Some thoughts on using classic literature

I introduce students within the work based learning curriculum to literature that I believe will constitute a rich experience for them: students can gain pleasure in reading these essays and stories, find significance and meaning in the writing, and learn from an exposition of eloquently articulated prose.

If I acquaint a student with *The Way to Wealth* (2007) or *Walden* (2007) or *The Prince* (2008), I am acquainting them with works that will resonate with those who have had the experience of life to appreciate the lessons and language of these texts: the works provide models of dealing with life which can reinforce students' own ideas. However, as a lecturer in work based learning and professional practice, I have rarely come across a student who has had a previous encounter with Franklin or Thoreau or Machiavelli, but I don't think it is an exaggeration to report that the students have invariably been immensely enriched by these first encounters. Similarly, students can be influenced by encounters with great prose writers. Here Gary is commenting on his experience reading the arch polemicist Paglia's (1992) essay excoriating the "narrow mindedness" of American academia:

When I first started reading the article I didn't see the relevance, but really enjoyed it by the end. I took quite a few things away from it and found aspects of it relevant to contemporary business. A topical aspect of her essay was her point about the 'Marxist managerial class [is] in a continual funk of anxiety and neurosis' (1992, p. 246). This comes up a lot in our smart phone always-on world. It is interesting to see that this was a recognised problem even before the electronic age took off, and could point to an area of psychology needing further investigation. I found encouragement in the area of motivation and inspiration – interpret your own world and create your own future - loved the advice 'shun careerists'. It struck me that a lot of modern business writing seems to recycle her advice. With my final project involving deep engagement with stakeholder management, which of course involves political awareness and understanding, her final piece of advice is one I will keep for a long time, 'learn the (dance) steps without being enslaved by them (p. 247).

Although in this reflective commentary Gary appears merely to have reduced his reading to a series of sound bites exported unreflectively from Paglia's work, in engaging with works of literature, other students exhibited more radically the impact of their reading on how they conceptualised their working and coaching practice. Gary read an essay which at first did not seem to have direct relevance to his coaching course. When he examined the essay more closely, he recognised that Paglia's words resonated with his own practice. Educators can therefore broaden their palette of writing – essays, fiction, non-fiction, poetry – in order to support students to express their ideas cogently as well as grapple with complex arguments. In the same vein as Calvino, Barzun (1991, p. 134) urges educators to introduce students to works which “recast for us the whole world into a new shape”. Paglia's essay may not have achieved this for Gary, but it certainly “threw a few glancing lights on what [he] already [knew or suspected]” (p.134).

Coaching can be enriched by an exploration of literature and could conceivably embed and sustain skills and good practices more effectively than the usual techniques drawn from evidence-based adult learning. Grant and Hartley (2013) point out that, despite enthusiasm, money and a high level of deft skills, workplace coaching has not succeeded as much as it should because “ingrained behaviours are difficult to change” (p.102). They offer practical insights and strategies aligned with an organisation's values and goals to create a more successful implementation of leader as coach model. I would go further by suggesting that “goal attainment and increased well-being” (p.112) could be enhanced by a programme of skills development involving the reading of literary texts. As Ben-Hur, Kinley and Jonsen (2012) argue, coaching executive teams to reach better decisions can be seriously hampered by the phenomenon of group-think characterised by an “overestimation of the capabilities of the group, closed mindedness and pressures for uniformity” (p.713). To combat the pernicious effects of group-think and intractable negative behaviours, perhaps we could look to literature: Barzun (1991, p.146) enumerates the advantages of being widely read:

there are no barriers between ideas, there is no jargon, no prevailing theory or method. There are books and readers, as on the first day of publication. Some of the results of scholarship may be brought in to shed occasional light on and around the work, but his work is there to shed its own light: it is not material for dissection or dissertation. Well read, everything in it may be usefully related to the world and to the Self; it is the role of the imagination to forge the links.

Too often coaching students, like students in any other field, remain bound by that field, fearful of entering into other disciplines, anxious to interrogate other theories, disinclined to sample other literature. We, as educators, must encourage them to read “beyond the brief”, so to speak.

Rationale behind a shift to an amalgam of narrative coaching and literature

Turnbull (2009), like all other writers who have developed learning, reflecting, coaching and mentoring models, highlights her approach as one eminently adapted to “help anyone raise their self-awareness and develop their capacity for learning” (p.12). In relation to coaching, she re-iterates the essence of the majority of the literature on coaching: coaching needs to be solution-focused; it must take care to address the needs of the whole person; it should take a holistic view of helping people work on solutions; it is an overarching philosophy; it is a skilled enterprise. There is nothing revelatory or revolutionary here: her philosophy and techniques are well documented throughout coaching literature in general. However, there are two points she makes, one in the form of a question, the other as an exhortation, both of which I want to address. In her introduction she poses the following: “why, with all our material resources in the western world, do we also have the most unhappy young people?” If I could reframe the question slightly by omitting the word “young”, I would like to offer some ideas that engage with this central question.

Benjamin Franklin, Niccolò Machiavelli, Giuseppe di Lampedusa and fear

I asked my group of coaching students to discuss ways they could achieve transformational change through coaching. As this was a distance learning course and we are expected to respond to each other's posts, Peter wrote the following:

Transformation can never exist in a climate of fear. Fear is what holds most people back – fear of failure, fear of being rejected by the boss, fear that their ideas won't be appreciated, fear that they will be ridiculed, even sacked. If employees could feel the fear and do it anyway, we would have a much more honest workforce. Leaders would be better challenged and creativity exponentially grown.

Machiavelli's (2008) *The Prince* examines political power in the 16th century Florentine Republic. Instead of examining the latest model on critical theory or power relations, students respond to this work that has generated polemical discussion ever since its appearance in the early 16th century. There is the additional pleasure of reading, even in translation, prose which has generated debate for centuries. A long thread of discussions emerged as a reaction to my introducing excerpts from Machiavelli's (2008) *The Prince* on power and Franklin's (2007) *The Way to Wealth* on industry. There seemed an increasing dissatisfaction with popular and widely practiced performance coaching models such as GROW (Whitmore, 2009) and a desire to connect more with their imagination, creativity and the language of emotion. The students were keen to discuss Machiavelli's words in relation to coaching strategies at their company: "For one can generally say this about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of change and greedy for gain" (p.58). Brian posted a letter to Machiavelli on Moodle:

Dear Machiavelli, I am concerned about your primitive vision of human nature. Nevertheless, I agree such analysis helps you to define a template of predictive behaviours. I think if we are raised with positive values, we are not led by fear.

Brian embraced the more optimistic, pragmatic "moral perfection" of Benjamin Franklin. He had digested Franklin's 1758 best-seller *The Way to Wealth*, a compendium of economic and moral individualism and decided to create what he termed, a list of moral precepts for his team. Like Carl, Brian claimed that Franklin had influenced his research considerably, particularly in his crafting his language carefully, as he ensured that his text was free from jargon and obfuscatory prose. Franklin's words "we may give advice but we cannot give conduct" (2007, p. 456) had led Brian to try to understand how much one can influence another by creating an individual coaching model that built on Franklin's story and created his own in the process.

Literature reveals a rich seam to mine in fashioning a project exploring how to use coaching models to improve organisational performance. Likewise, narratives are important for understanding the "lived experience of humans" (Garvis, 2015, p. vii), and there is a fascinating intellectual tradition upheld by scholars such as Bruner and Coles that maintains that human experience is a narrative phenomenon best understood by story. Coles, who taught Harvard medical students in a seminar entitled "Literature and Medicine" and recalled introducing students to Flannery O'Connor and William Carlos Williams, recognised that because life can be so "complex, ironic, ambiguous, and fateful", exploring research through the lenses of psychiatry, psychology and social sciences "[is] not the only means by which one might view the world" (1989, p. xvii). Thirty years ago he introduced a programme at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in which he invited professionals to talk to the students about their working lives and about their responses to specific novels. He then extended his ideas to see if reading novels and stories could help law students at Harvard Law School and business students at Harvard Business School. He concluded that:

The whole point of stories is not ‘solutions’ or ‘resolutions’ but a broadening and even a heightening of our struggles – with new protagonists and antagonists introduced, with new sources of concern or apprehension or hope, as one’s mental life accommodates itself to a series of arrivals: guests who have a way of staying, but not necessarily staying put (p.129).

Coles makes a persuasive case for stories and their usefulness. More recently, Drake (2007), in demonstrating how to reflexively bring one’s own story into the coaching context, claimed that a “coaching dialogue” helps develop adult thinking and capabilities, and that we, as educators, need to create stronger links with narrative psychology (p. 238). Students within this cohort complained that models like GROW, for example, were too goal oriented. Using the model faithfully may make an impact; it is easy to measure; it is easy to interpret. However, in order to address the customer experience, training needs to change, and there needs to be more social selling: people in the field need to “tell their story”. As Andrews et al (2008, p. 43) point out, we “understand personal experience stories because of narratives’ second defining feature: narratives are the means of human sense-making”. The stories clients tell about themselves are the key to their very identities. Drake (2007) emphasises how vital it is in coaching to see stories as the means of helping clients to understand their current behaviour patterns: we are forever in the process of construing ourselves. He invites us to look at novels as a meaningful source of insight for human dynamics.

Paulo had been captivated by Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s 1958 novel *Il Gattopardo (The Leopard)* which charts the Sicilian bourgeoisie’s dislodging from power in a changing world heralded by the arrival of Garibaldi in 1860. Paulo’s intention was to draw a parallel between the disruptive changes in his company and the story of an aristocracy that would rather destroy itself than to succumb to outside historical forces. If we accept as clearly self-evident that the goal of coaching is to discover a unified self-hood, we can see our own story-telling and others’ stories in the form of literary fiction (and non-fiction) as useful coaching strategies. As Bruner argues, great fiction:

offers alternative worlds that put the actual one in a new light. Literature’s chief instrument in creating this magic, is of course, language its tropes and devices that carry our meaning – making beyond banality into the realm of the possible. It explores human plights through the prism of imagination (Bruner, 2007, p. 9 – 10).

Through the use of narrative, we are able to fashion a “root metaphor” to coach employees. The vessels for carrying meaning at every organisation can make the language we use more powerful (Drake and Lanahan, 2007). Language, of course, is shaped by our thinking, and our duty is to help our students use language with precision and clarity.

One of the final posts before the end of the module was an unprompted link to Walt Whitman’s (2007) 1865 poem, *When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer*. It might be helpful to reproduce the poem which is brief:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shows the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,

Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Underneath the link to the poem, Francis had posed a simple question, “How often do we make time to simply be present in ourselves?” For days no one responded to the post and I figured Whitman might have been a step too far: the poem perhaps had little connection to their current tasks of writing up their data analysis and completing their introductions and conclusions. Then a post appeared from Simon:

There are several formal ways we can map out and engage with stakeholders. Of course we need to be project-management oriented in trying to implement a structured and disciplined approach to sales management through coaching. But if only we realised that instead of aiming to be the learn'd astronomer and let our goal become being the night sky, our organisational identity could be so much better framed.

The power of subjectivity

In presenting her CARE model of coaching, Turnbull (2009, p. 17) is emphatic about the objective of coaching in addressing “the needs of the whole person”. What she, and others, who produce such models are less clear about is the crucial role language plays in developing coaching skills. In her discussion of empowerment, she urges the educator to adjust his/her own language to reflect the language styles of young people. If, as she claims, she is careful to place stress on “skill in using language” (p.147), an exhortation to mimic or emulate a less than articulate style (by reflecting the language styles of young people) could not be any more misplaced. From my experience, the greatest frustration students experience lies in their inability to produce cogent prose. For example, Franklin’s *The Way to Wealth* provides solid advice on time management. More than a set of bullet points about keeping to a schedule, his words are deeply memorable and open a wider debate about morality and ethics:

Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all easy, and He that riseth late, must trot all day, and shall scarce overtake his business at night; while Laziness travels so slowly, that Poverty soon overtakes him (Franklin, 2007, p. 452).

As Jeremy pointed out, “This is the voice of human experience from centuries ago.” The 18th century prose may not be clear to our 21st century ears, but the rhythm and beauty of Franklin’s words make a much lasting impression about industry and working hard than any manner of contemporary self-help management tracts.

Turnbull’s valid points about professional expertise emerging from reflection, coaching being used as a way of improving work effectiveness and the need to address the whole person in teaching are eclipsed by a more focused strategy to address her example of young people too anxious or stressed to learn. She claims that we cannot separate learning to achieve academic qualifications from the learning that emerges from social, personal or emotional growth. Although I agree with her insistence on reuniting these unhelpful distinctions as well as citing Bruner to highlight the crucial role of talk as a learning tool, she neglects the centrality of story as the key to learning and knowledge in Bruner’s philosophy. Similarly, Waterhouse (2007) makes a convincing case for the power of stories to illuminate lived experience. Language acquisition is a process of negotiating meanings: by telling the story of an event, we create knowledge, and the language we use is the means by which we make sense of the world. Hamilton et al (2008) also provide evidence that students’ writing can be strengthened considerably by exploring feelings, desires, needs – addressing anxiety or stress – by focussing on story and narrative.

Recently I introduced this group of students to H.D. Thoreau's (2007) *Walden*. The following is an excerpt from Thoreau's description of why he went to the woods 'to live deliberately' and how he intended to live:

so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swathe and shove close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it (p.1455).

This excerpt sparked a lively debate about contemporary work-life balance and resonated deeply with those sales executives who were driven by the exigencies of constant travel, client demands, company policies and procedures and the ultimate balance sheet. When asked if Thoreau's writing had a place in a coaching master's degree, Francis replied:

In *Walden* Thoreau turns his ideas into action. Too often at our company, we are not committed to testing our principles. We don't turn our ideas into action. Thoreau offers his own blueprint about how to live. OK, it may be unrealistic – it may be totally unreal to expect any of us to go off and find someplace far away from civilization and live off the land. However, there are lessons to learn in *Walden*. Thoreau doesn't instruct, he doesn't preach, he doesn't tell his readers what to do. He shows. He shows and makes the reader share his experience. This has clear implications for our business as well as how we demonstrate the efficacy of our own product.

Francis condensed what the group had been saying during our sessions together: there was no time to reflect on work tasks, on both professional and personal relationships, indeed on the academic reading and writing required to gain a master's degree. Students were learning, however difficult to do in a world of deadlines, to *show*, rather than *tell* when discussing their work. In other words, they recognised the value of writing discursively rather than creating mere description. Reading Thoreau helped them to see the connection between observing something at work and then analysing the significance of what they had observed. Rather than rushing through their narratives, they had learned to slow down to try to ensure that the reader not only received a full picture of what they were depicting but could appreciate the significance of what was being highlighted in their writing. As Francis colourfully put it, "I want the reader to know how the room where I coach looks, how our coffee tastes, how the just polished desk smells, how long the pauses between what we say to each other take – I want my text to come alive rather than lay on the page lifeless and dull."

Turnbull (2009, p. 147) perceives a connection between skill in the use of language, but is adamant that "precise grammatical correctness is not the most important feature in forming coaching questions". Yet students yearn to write better and instinctively recognise the potency of being able to use language with precision, even eloquence. The value they saw in Thoreau's *Walden* focused on how he expresses himself. "The very words he selects alerts us to his commitment", Francis insisted. "His words are carefully chosen – ours can be full of jargon and meaningless. I like to call them 'insider phrases'." Elbow (1989) is convinced that intuitive or creative thinking leading to more thoughtful writing is generated by being exposed to a rich array of materials: "The way we enlarge the penumbra of our tacit knowledge is by searching harder and further with the beam of our focal knowledge" (p. 57).

Coaching definitions and usage of the term "coaching culture" can be perceived through many different lenses. In the 1990s there was a significant amount of academic literature centred on the definition of coaching alone (Grant 2014). Few would disagree, though, with the notion that coaching is "an effective change methodology" (p.19). Many educators could be persuaded to combine

narrative coaching and literature to support their students to make more meaningful sense of their research and data as well as to articulate that research and data more clearly.

Conclusion

Stories, imaginative essays, fiction, non-fiction, poetry – all narrative forms can support coaching students in identifying the key themes that organise the way a life story or an organisational story is told. Boenish-Brednick (2002), in discussing her own coaching practice, encapsulates how I work with students to explore themes from their own lives and from literature, suggesting that people develop specific narratives as a result of important events in their histories. Repeating these themes helps us to write structured and polished accounts. These themes explain and justify people's actions and decisions and are part of our sense-making processes. The models of reflection and learning that coaching has drawn on can make positive and effective changes in students' personal and professional lives, but, if we, as educators, are attentive to our students' stories and those fashioned by the imaginations of great writers, we add a further dimension to the richness of coaching. For, to enlarge the "spirit by varied experience" (Barzun, 1991, p.144) is surely the very essence of what we are trying to achieve with our students.

This past year I have taken on a group of American coaching students who are all senior sales executives in a large multi-national financial organisation. The students are evenly distributed between male and female, and are engaged in some compelling investigations such as whether men and women coach and prefer to be coached differently; whether coaching "millennials" (people who reached maturity at the turn of the last century) is different from coaching other age groups; and whether gratitude as a concept needs to be at the forefront of a coaching intervention. They have been the first group of students who have been uniformly receptive to reading fiction in the area of sales (and working relationships) and are now reading a selection of plays and short stories from both the 18th and 19th centuries including work from Arthur Miller, David Mamet, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne and John Cheever. I have asked them to select a character from works by these writers and provide a description of a useful and sustainable coaching intervention. The characters typify a range of dysfunctional personalities, presenting traits and emotions such as anger, apathy, avoidance, lassitude and an inability to cope or face reality, and the coach/student needs to facilitate a move towards a more positive rapport with other staff, with family and friends and with society. I hope that using fictional characters in coaching makes for a rich engagement with these writers' ideas about work, morality and the existential self, and in doing so, provides a deeper and more imaginative learning experience to the professional development of managers and executives in the business world.

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