

Improved Goals, Action Plans, Planning Ahead And Reflection: students' self-assessment of coaching

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Introduction

Having trained MBA leadership students as coaches, Hunt and Weintraub (2004) found that coaching promoted self-awareness, reflection and engagement with the process, and most effective coaches were reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983), since they reflected and developed knowledge.

In a study measuring the relative effects of external, peer or self-coaching, MBA students coached by external coaches developed a higher degree of team-playing behaviour, and those who were coached by the external coach or self-coached showed improved grades (Sue-Chan and Latham, 2004).

This paper reports on small-scale, initial research that investigated the effects of coaching on self-awareness, reflection and engagement among undergraduate students at London Metropolitan University.

Modern coaching and teaching practice

Modern coaching is non-hierarchical, focused on the client's needs (Starr 2003) and has progressed from the "expert" coach (Whitworth *et al.*, 1998). Modern teaching and learning practice has similarly evolved from delivery by the "expert" (Fry *et al.*, 2003) to learner-centred practice (Biggs, 2003).

Modern coaching was developed from sports coaching and uses the common processes of observation and constructive feedback (Whitmore 1992). Bivens (1996) cites non-judgemental questioning and setting goals as the most important functions of the coach. Harold (2004) summarises coaching as consisting of often a short-term programme of action plans, implementing goals and reflecting on results. Modern teaching encourages students to self direct their learning (Kolb, 1984), reflect upon and evaluate their own learning experiences, and plan for their own development (Brennan, 2004).

This study used non-hierarchical coaching methods: reflection, feedback, action plans and goals, in line with modern teaching and learning practice. The coach used non-judgmental directed questioning, constructive feedback and “deep listening” techniques.

Student profiles

A short programme of coaching was delivered for two students, coded S1 and S2. Both were non-UK, EC citizens, aged between 27 and 31. Student S1 completed HND Sports and Leisure Management and progressed to full time employment. Student S2 had completed first-year BA Events Management. Both were high achievers, S1 obtained a distinction and S2 a first for all assignments, and both spoke two languages in addition to excellent English. Both worked part time during the past year of study. Their willingness to participate in this kind of programme ties in with the finding by Jones (2002) that ESOL (English second language) and mature students are easier to recruit to peer-assisted learning programmes.

The coaching programme

The students attended a forty-five minute induction session, to help identify and focus on goals. The coaching programme consisted one sixty minute, face-to-face meeting and three or four forty-five minute telecoaching sessions (coaching sessions conducted by telephone). Prior to each session students completed a coaching preparation form, outlining, progress in between sessions, reflection and goals for the next session.

Feedback on coaching sessions and action plans were e-mailed to students after each session. The final session reflected on progress achieved over the programme and constructed an exit plan. A questionnaire was sent one month after the sessions to collect the students’ feedback on the coaching programme and self-evaluation of skills development and progress.

Results

Student S1 identified goals related to work and work/ life balance: to build university/work transition skills, to complete a work project and take “time out” for own development. S1 achieved all goals on time, apart from one, which was not possible due to a technical problem.

S1 attended five sessions and preferred telecoaching, saying it was “fast, effective and cut down on time lost through travelling”. The methods used by the coach were scored by the student on a scale of zero to five: listening, questioning, encouraging, helping, answering, challenging, supporting, humour, seriousness, all scored (5/5).

Student S1 reported coaching assisted with the realisation of priorities and getting more organised. The benefits of coaching were the management of workload and “a

lot more” planning ahead. Additionally it was indicated that through telecoaching, the student was able to recognise “weaknesses” and devise methods to overcome them. The student suggested that the coaching could be improved by additional feedback by from the coach.

Table 1. Student (S1) skills levels, before and after coaching

Skill	Score before Coaching	Score after Coaching
Focused	3	5
Self-awareness	3	5
Understand own responsibilities	3	5
Understand how to prioritise	3	5
Take rest when need	1	3
Have a plan for next 12 months	0	2
Ask colleagues for help	3	5

Student S1 scored skills level before coaching and after coaching, (scores 0 to 5, for a total of 22 skills). Table 1 shows skills scored 2-points higher after coaching (all other skills scored 1-point higher) and confirms the gains and benefits of coaching mentioned above.

Student S2 identified goals regarding progress to second year, research into programme-planning choices and career planning. Student S2 achieved all goals on time and revisited the action plan to set new goals in line with achievements and new gaps identified.

S2 attended four sessions; meetings were preferred as they were “more personal”. The scores for methods used by the coach were: (5/5) questioning challenging, (4/5) listening, encouraging, helping, answering, (3/5) supporting, humour (2/5) seriousness. S2 said the review process led to new reflection.

S2 indicated the best things about coaching were self-awareness and guidance towards the future. Coaching boosted knowledge on how to devise plans, action plan and research in depth. Key areas benefited through coaching were organisational, business and action planning skills. According to this student, the coaching could be improved by going through the forms in more depth.

Student S2 identified personal skills gaps, including numeracy and the need to address “gaps” in attention to detail. S2 identified a part-time employment strategy as a practical solution to address numeracy and personal experience and learning. Data for skills levels before and after coaching was incomplete.

Conclusions

These findings support other research into coaching (see Hunt *et al.*, 2004) that highlights its value for promoting reflection, self-awareness and constructive action. Borkowski (2001) emphasises the importance of feedback to the process: acting as a mirror, the coach allows the client to see blind spots.

Table 2: Key achievements and benefits of coaching, self assessment

Student	Key achievements	Key Benefits of coaching
S1	Realising priorities and getting more organised	Managing workload, planning ahead and prioritising
S2	How to devise an action plan and how to research in depth	Action planning, self-awareness, organisational and business skills

Both students said coaching helped with setting and achieving goals, action plans, planning ahead, prioritising and reflection.

In a work situation S1 said, "After reflecting on a coaching session, I thought, I can do this". S2 commented, "It's been a great experience, I've gained skills I'll take with me for the rest of my life".

Students had differing opinions on the preferred method of coaching; one preferred telecoaching the other face-to-face meetings. However, both said more feedback/explanation would improve the process. Telecoaching sessions enabled one student to explore a complex issue: identifying "weakness".

Questions arise including how to ensure the recruitment process is inclusive, and targets students who would benefit, for example from being able to manage their study time (Furlong and Forsyth 2003). Other challenges for developing coaching in the higher education context are how to train and evaluate the performance of coaches and develop a generic framework for coaching learning experiences.

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Bibliographical note

Allison Wylde, a visiting lecturer at London Metropolitan University, teaches Quantitative Analysis and HE Orientation, and started academic life as a biologist and postgraduate researcher. Appointed director of NDMP charity, delivering training for socially excluded young people, she was invited to join the Joseph Rowntree Foundation panel investigating the job market and gendered work, and was commissioned by The Baring Foundation to undertake research examining social exclusion.

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