DEVELOPING AWARENESS IN COACH TRAINING WHILE BEING MINDFUL OF EMERGENT ANXIETIES

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The research explores the developmental journey of trainee coaches. Research was driven by the author's observations of the variable levels of the growth of awareness (self and others) noticed in trainees. Journeys into self-awareness were often accompanied by increased anxiety. Such anecdotal observations suggest that anxiety might interfere with the growing awareness. This paper explores the environment that supports the development of awareness, while acknowledging the associated anxieties. An emergent issue within the research was the description of emotions noticed by the coaches in themselves and clients. They noticed more 'negative' emotions in others and more 'positive' emotions in themselves.

Keywords: coach training, awareness, self-awareness, anxiety, emotions

INTRODUCTION

As a provider of coach training programmes, I am seeking to improve, on a continuous basis, the quality of the delivery to learners. Coaching is evolving rapidly as a profession, evidenced through its increased take-up by organisations and by the burgeoning literature. Training programmes need to respond accordingly. .
I created this research from my perceptions of the number of students who were challenged in their ability to grow personal self-awareness. I take it as a prerequisite that self-awareness and ability to work with one's own and the client's psychological and emotional dimensions are critical factors that enable effective and safe coaching. Given the importance of the coach being able to create a safe, holding environment for the client, my concern is that the reputation of coaching as a profession can be put 'on the line' if the coach is unable to do this.

The research sought to explore the following:

- Approaches in the coach training environment that enable or hinder the growth of awareness within trainee coaches
- What might be learned from the trainee coaches in their descriptions of their journeys into self-awareness
- The relationship between anxiety and self-awareness – to consider the observed anxiety that often accompanies individual journeys into self-awareness.

The desired outcome of this research is to understand the issues more clearly and then to improve services to trainee coaches – and, subsequently, to their clients. It is also to enhance understanding of these personalised journeys.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing range of coaching literature and its focus is predominantly on coaching and its application. The provider's role is to digest this literature and then to apply it appropriately within the coach training environment. This is based upon the premise that the role of the coach training environment is to function as an experiential learning arena for later practice.

A selection of the coaching and related literature that is applied within the coach training programmes includes Whitmore (2009):

"Awareness is knowing what is happening around you.
Self-awareness is knowing what you are experiencing."

Awareness – leading to responsibility - are central pillars of the coaching and coach training approach. Gallwey's (2000) Inner Game is a further foundation for coach training. The simple exercise of catching a ball is used to introduce the Inner Game - and highlights the challenges faced in training coaches.
This single exercise brings into focus significant elements of the coaching development journey.

1) When the exercise is introduced and a volunteer invited to take part, there is observed an air of various emotions, including anxiety, among the trainee coaches, (Increased when the facilitator requests that the volunteer is someone who doesn't believe they can catch a ball.)
2)   When the exercise starts, the observers relax, while the participant experiences the exercise.
3) By the conclusion of the exercise, the participant will not infrequently have experienced a breakthrough, moment, having transformed himself from a ball dropper to a ball catcher. In this moment he has perhaps undone 20 years of irrational beliefs that he cannot catch a ball.

Clarkson (1999, p.37), exploring the awareness phase of The Gestalt Cycle of Experience, described awareness as:

"a meaning-making function which creates fresh Gestalten – new insight into the obvious unity of disparate pieces of self-knowledge, or consciousness, as if for the first time, of the fruity perfumed golden spray of breaking a piece of orange skin."

So the heightened awareness leads from the anxiety of anticipation to the excitement of (self) discovery. The journey of self-awareness (developing ourselves and awareness of ourselves) sits squarely alongside the development of coaching skills (developing others and awareness of others.)

Such pre-activity anxiety observed in the managed environment of the training room is helpful in the learning journey. It will later be experienced by the (trainee) coach with clients. O'Neill (2007):

"Coaches are not immune to become anxious, especially while facing the anxiety and reactivity of their clients."

So if trainee coaches experience anxiety ahead of exercises in the workshop, then how well equipped will they be to handle the transference from their client's anxiety? Kilburg (2002):

"fear and anxiety can overwhelm anyone at any time."

What counter-transference might they then bring to the coaching relationship? How might such emotions interfere with the coach's awareness of himself and his client?

Self-awareness within coaching is fundamental if the coach is to be aware of the client and create the holding environment for the coaching. The successful ball catcher has got in touch with her anxiety and ,moved forward to the action phase of the Gestalt Cycle and achieved both contact and satisfaction. Engellau (2007) described the importance of self-awareness through its absence:

"There are many examples where a lack of self-awareness has a negative impact on coaching outcomes."

The examples above are influenced by various perspectives. What is open to the coach is a rich, eclectic mix of approaches. These can be introduced appropriately for any individual client at any single moment in time.

Perls (1951) described anxiety as the basic symptom encountered by therapists in all patients. He distinguished excitement (increased energy mobilization) from anxiety, (suppression of excitement).

Clarkson (1999, p.99), quoting Perls:

"Anxiety is the gap between the now and the then. If you are in the now, you can't be anxious, because the excitement flows immediately into ongoing spontaneous activity."

So anxiety restricts the ability to work in the here and now. This might present a challenge in conditions where there is the client's anxiety, perhaps the coach's anxiety and the co-created anxiety. Peltier (2002) suggests the coach normalises it or welcomes it; O'Neill (2007) urges coaches not to be overwhelmed by it (backbone and heart) and Pooley (2007, p.122) proposes it as an enabler:

"Once the environment is set and the client is both comfortable enough, and anxious enough, to engage in exploring some of their preoccupations, play becomes possible."

So as a coach heading to meet with a client, is this a case of being in the here and now, relaxed, excited and anxious, ready to work with the client's anxiety? Accepting and

using this anxiety as an enabler (rather than something to be stepped back from) may reap rich rewards.

This review of the literature has considered the role of awareness and the presence of anxiety within the coaching relationship. But what are the consequences for coach training? What helps the growth of awareness? What might hinder it?

METHODOLOGY

Context: observations in coach training programmes

I notice that in virtually all coach training programmes, sooner or later there is a discussion on the boundary between coaching and counselling. "It seems a bit like therapy." is the frequently heard comment.

Typically, it doesn't take long for the group to raise the issue (usually on the first or second day), discuss the differences between coaching and counselling, agree they are coaches, agree to work within their boundaries, and agree not to go beyond their boundaries. And with that, they can keep themselves securely in their comfort zones. But, I wonder, what does this miss? Where does this leave the client? Or the coach? Or the opportunity for the co-created reality? Or the potential for the coach's own development?

My concern is that such views indicate a possible retreat from the boundary edge. On the one hand acknowledging and working to boundaries is important, but on the other hand it might be hoped that the trainee coach is also continuously looking to grow his comfort zone, grow his awareness of self and others and thereby expand his personal boundaries. There is perhaps anxiety experienced here: a tension between growth and safety.

Methodology

 The research was conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively. Much of it was carried out online anonymously. Around 50 coaches have been engaged in the research process to date. These are generally coaches either in the late stages of training or in the early stages of their work as 'professional' coaches. The gender split was 50:50. Approximately 40% of the coaches were based in the UK. 60% of them were employed, the rest self-employed.
This research was divided into two halves:

- Their experiences in the coach training courses
- Their experiences with clients

The research explored some of the typical activities that can be found in coach training programmes:

- Preferences for knowledge / academic aspects experienced on coach training programmes

- Helpfulness for growing self-awareness of different approaches typically used in coach training programmes
- Personal comfort levels experienced when contributing to discussions & self-disclosing in different contexts in coach training programmes
- Emotions noticed in self / others on the journey to greater self-awareness

Some examples of the questions and the format they were given includes:

- *How comfortable do you feel contributing to discussions in the following contexts, covering coach training workshops?*
- *How comfortable are you talking about yourself - self-disclosure - in the following contexts?*

In these and other questions, respondents were given a five-option response. In this instance from 'very comfortable' through to 'very uncomfortable'. In other instances, they were given five options from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.
Other questions included levels of agreement and disagreement against prompted statements. There were also opportunities for respondents to provide unprompted comments and answers. Some of the relevant responses are detailed below.

FINDINGS

Accredited coach training covers both knowledge/ academic aspects and practical aspects. 24% expressed a moderate or strong preference for knowledge aspects; 47% a preference for practical aspects. 29% had no preference either way.

The research asked participants how helpful they found different exercises commonly found in the coach training programmes. These included:

- Observing a coaching demonstration session
- Being the client in a demonstration session
- Being the coach/ client/ observer in a triad coach practice session with peers
- Group discussions

Most of the answers were in the 'extremely helpful' or 'quite helpful' sections (five step range of answers: 'extremely helpful' to 'not at all helpful'.) The research confirmed that the coach practice sessions in triads, where participants alternate roles, is of critical importance. Also very important were demonstration sessions, but those surveyed described deriving more benefit from the peer coaching approach, provided these are conducted and managed appropriately.

Group discussions were also very important, and participants found small group discussions more helpful than large ones.

Coaches were asked how comfortable they felt contributing to discussions in a variety of contexts. The greater the number of people, the less the comfort as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1.
Contribution to discussions

Contribution to different discussion formats	% of respondents who described themselves as feeling 'very comfortable'
With a single partner	95%
In threes	86%
In groups of up to five	80%
In groups of six or more	60%
In online discussions	33%

One respondent stated that online discussions could effectively be a 'one-way' discussion, with a comment sent out electronically, but without any immediate feedback. Research then progressed from contributing to discussions to the practice of self-disclosure. How comfortable were respondents talking about themselves (self-disclosing) in the same contexts?

Table 2.
Self-disclosure in different contexts

Self-disclosure in different discussion formats	% of respondents who described themselves as feeling 'very comfortable'
With a single partner	67%
In threes	43%
In groups of up to five	38%
In groups of six or more	29%
In online discussions	20%

What is evident from Tables 1 & 2 is a significant drop-off in personal comfort levels from contributing in discussions to self-disclosing. It is worth noting that only 67% - two out of every three - are 'very comfortable' disclosing with a single partner. Partner discussions replicate the 1:1 coaching environment in the coach training programme. These coaches will be seeking to create a safe environment for their clients to talk and explore. However, there is a significant percentage of respondents who are less than 'very comfortable' following this behaviour themselves. What implication does this have for their journeys into self-awareness? And for their subsequent work with clients?
One respondent commented:

"In general it is not very 'enjoyable' to disclose myself, though I have no major problem to do it for the sake of learning."

As with the ball catching exercise discussed earlier, there is perhaps anxiety along this journey into self-awareness. This shows the importance of coach training that puts the trainee in the position they will be seeking to create with their clients – and the provider's

role in ensuring this is done safely and provides encouragement for the trainee coach to explore this path.

Participants were presented with a series of statements relating to their journey into self-awareness. The highest level of agreement (2/3) was with the statement:
'I have strong self-awareness but have much more to learn.'

Respondents were presented with a number of statements that relate to self-awareness. They were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a five-step scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. All respondents agreed with the statements that the coach's high level of self-awareness is crucial for coaching (80% strongly agreed; 20% agreed.) When presented with the statement that self-awareness is essential to understand others, 73% strongly agree and 20% agreed. 7% neither agreed nor disagreed.
One respondent wrote:

"The coach is there to help another raise their awareness for themselves. Interference in the mind of the coach is therefore an issue to consider as well as a problem if the coach is no longer raising awareness but directing."

Respondents were asked to describe the challenges they had experienced in growing their self-awareness. They emphasised the importance of having personal space and time for reflection. Specific comments included:

- *"Confidence to tackle what you discover about yourself."*
- *"Getting others to be frank and honest about me and realise this is helpful, not a negative."*
- *"Ironically, trying to be more aware."*
- *"Managing my inner interferences which sometimes drains my energy. Taking risks. I tend to play it safe which could mean I miss valuable challenging opportunities."*
- *"That I do not always know how to discover my blind spots."*

Respondents were also asked what advice they would give to other coaches to grow their self-awareness. Again time, reflection and working with a supervisor were recurrent themes. Comments included:

- *"Gather as rounded a picture of yourself as possible."*
- *"Challenge yourself to something you never thought you would do…just get out of your comfort zone and experience the emotions and impact on your life."*
- *"Be aware of your reactions to others in other aspects of your life as well as in the coaching relationship."*
- *"Time you offer yourself to grow is the most precious moment of your life and certainly will pay back."*
- *"Just be present for the client and be yourself."*
- *"Love yourself."*

- *"Invest in self-development. Read, ask for feedback, talk about your own development with a friend/ colleague or supervisor. Keep a journal so that you can see how you grow in your own journey. Celebrate success."*

The research then focused upon emotions and respondents were asked what emotions they noticed about:

(a) their individual journeys into self-awareness
(b) their clients' journeys into self-awareness.

Respondents were given a list of different emotions to select from. These emotions were ones selected upon the basis of personal observations in the training environment. They are listed in table 3, below.

Respondents could either tick or leave blank each emotion, indicating if they noticed it in self and others. Emotions that are underlined indicate this emotion was particularly noticeable.

Table 3.
Emotions noticed in self and others

Emotions noticed more in self	Emotions noticed roughly equally between self and others	Emotions noticed more in clients
Relaxed	Excited	Confused
Intrigued	Amused	Frustrated
Enjoyable	Surprised	Vulnerable
Calm	Reassured	Relieved
	Impatient	Flustered
	Despondent	Anxious
		Apologetic
		Cautious
		Afraid
		Sad
		Regretful
		Irritated
		Annoyed
		Indifferent
		Embarrassed
		Threatened
		Ashamed

There is a difference between emotions noticed more in others than in oneself. Respondents noticed a greater number of 'positive' emotions in self and a greater number of 'negative' ones in others. The ratio of 'negative' emotions noticed in others against those noticed in self is approximately 2:1. The emotions with the biggest differences are the following:

Table 4.
Ratio of emotions noticed in others and self

Emotion	Ratio of noticing the emotion in others and self
Threatened	3 to 1
Flustered	3 to 1
Apologetic	3 to 1
Embarrassed	3 to 1
Regretful	4 to 1
Afraid	4 to 1

The emotion that is most noticed in others is anxiety – 95% of respondents noticed it in their clients (45% in themselves) – a ratio of approximately 2:1.
It should be noted that the small number of trainee coaches originally from a therapeutic background (two) described noticing a wide range of emotions, both negative and positive, in themselves and others.

DISCUSSION

Why are these emotions more noticeable in clients than in ourselves? This provoked a number of questions that is beyond the scope of this research, but included:

• Is it because the respondents have already worked through their 'difficult' stuff and are now more self-aware and more at ease with themselves?
• Are they projecting negative emotions onto others?
• Are they not seeing them? In denial?
• Are they working with others who, because they are less self-aware, are experiencing these more negative emotions?
• What else?

From the coach training observational perspective, consider again those occasions when volunteers were asked to take part in the ball-catching exercise (or, for example put themselves forward for a coaching demonstration session.) This request was – and is - often followed by those long silences – and what are the emotions observed in students then? From the above list, definitely anxiety, feeling threatened and flustered with a potential for embarrassment. So is there dissonance in the anxiety the trainee coach might possess but not see in himself, only his clients?

To return to the coach training context, what are the anxieties frequently encountered there?

• Exposure through an exercise or demonstration session
• Self-disclosure
• Size of the discussion groups
• The learning environment

- Starting to work with clients
- Having to write/ submit an assignment
- Self-disclosure in the assignment
- Belief: 'I should be a fully competent coach' (what Ellis might term an 'irrational belief')

An important part of the coach training journey is to increase the comfort zone. If not, then perhaps the coach will retreat from the boundary edge and lessen the potential for co-created reality. Perhaps there is an optimal balance of being in the here and now, being aroused for performance, perhaps in touch with – and using as a resource - one's own anxiety.

To summarise some of the findings from the research:

1) The coach training journey – from the discussions in groups on the first morning right through to the writing of assignments – provides a wealth of opportunities for students to get in touch with their anxieties.
2) Excitement, anxiety, arousal and stress will emerge.. Anxiety takes the coach away from the here and now, whether originating from the client or self.
3) Getting in touch with personal anxieties helps the development of the trainee coach.
4) Anxiety in the client and coach is normal and not to be avoided.
5) Anxiety as transference provides useful data for the coach; its usefulness lessened if the coach is not in touch with his anxieties
6) Respondents to the survey notice 'negative' emotions more in clients than in themselves. They notice more 'positive' emotions in themselves to a greater degree.
7) The optimal coach training developmental journey – as with the coach client relationships - straddles boundary edges. Coaching is described as a dance – perhaps this is learning to tango as well as to waltz.

CONCLUSIONS

While conducted over an extended period of time, this research has been conducted on a small scale (50 coaches involved to date) and should be viewed accordingly. It is also predicated along some of my contentions (identified in research) and observations.
The implications for practice are various, as described in the paper. They have helped me to evolve experiential activities in the coach training programmes, focused around exploration of self and others in a safe environment.
The research has raised further questions for future exploration.

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