

# Suppose everything we knew about coach education was wrong

## Background

In 2011 Clutterbuck and Megginson (2011) published an online paper on 'stages of maturity'. Here they outlined a 'tentative concept of coach maturity'. In 2022, Rajasinghe et al. (2022) conducted a large Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study which employed this 'tentative concept' as a starting point. The team of researchers interviewed 32 experienced international coaches and found that the routes of development are many and varied. The research highlighted that developing into an experienced coach is not a straightforward or even a straight-line process and that the 'staged model of development' presented in the 2011 paper was not reported as part of the experienced coaches' learning and development. This research raises questions about the current state of the formal training market for coaches and the assumptions upon which it is based.

## How we got to where we are...The wild west

Back in 2000, the American academic, Warren Bennis, referring to coaching, said in Morris & Tarpley (2000) "I'm concerned about unlicensed people doing this." This article was probably the first to raise concerns about standards in coaching practice and used the term 'wild west of coaching' to describe the then current state. This term gathered momentum within the coaching world on both sides of the Atlantic and was exemplified in an article by Stratford Sherman and Alyssa Freas called 'The Wild West of Executive Coaching' in 2004.

The article bemoans that organizations seem to be charting their own courses in relation to coaching and that, there is little evidence that coaching works or about the efficacy of various coaching process models, that there are no barriers to entry and coaches are self-styled. It also mentions but downplays that coaching is a promising, pioneering and this is an exciting time in business.

Within the article it is easy to detect two discourses working together to create a position. These are the therapeutic discourse and the business discourse of performance.

The 'therapy discourse' is a loud discourse in the 'wild west' discourse. It's about psychologists with an interest in coaching transferring their professional practice to coaching. This is about 'control' and is based on the mantra that out of control is bad and under control is good! So, this group of people may say "let's create rules, standards and ethical codes to tame the 'wild west' and of course, we know best what these should be!"

Within this 'wild west' discourse is also the idea that the coaching market is chaotic and that the 'good work' of psychologists will be undermined by big rough cowboys running amok and spoiling the fun! The response was to create corrals to hold all 'good' non wild west people together and to stop others 'making things up as they go along'.

The article problematized coaching and the solution can only be found in a professionalized body which, rather paternalistically, knows best.

The performative discourse is a model of coaching advocated by the authors of this paper, who are executive coaching psychologists. This discourse aims to appeal to the managerialists who think management is all about performance. It gives a positive perspective of coaching's potential under their rules.

The 'wild west of coaching' could be seen as an organising slogan or rallying cry for the creation of professional coaching bodies. It helps to strengthen their claim for to exist and sets them above the 'wild west' in order make themselves attractive and civilised!

There is an alternative discourse. If Jessie James was viewed as a Robin Hood figure rather than as an outlaw, there would be different view of a cowboy! In modern cowboy country, cowboys are good. They care for the animals, manage the land, mend fences and gates and do ecologically sound work.

The 'wild west' could, as an alternative, also mean pioneering, innovation and creativity, working at the boundaries with a sense of adventure and challenge.

## **Which would you rather have?**

Many coaching commentators argue that coaching is derived from a person-centred humanist philosophy (Parsloe and Leedham, 2009; Whitmore, 2009; Connor and Pokora, 2012; Du Toit, 2014; Stelter, 2019). Humanism is about an ethical and democratic way of being. It is about individuals having the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It recognises the human potential to be ethical and build a more humane society through a sense of free inquiry and the infinite capacity for people to learn and develop. It is an inclusive philosophy.

Imagine if subscribers to the negative discourse of the 'wild west' could take this humanist and inclusive perspective, how different would the paraphernalia of professionalization look? For example, it would accept difference and variation because diversity is a good thing. It would accept the innovation and creativity and the pioneering spirit. It would not seek to create 'in' groups and 'out' groups and perhaps it may live up to its espoused philosophy to build a more humane society. Now wouldn't that be a fine thing? However, in 2023 this is not the case as coaching seems to have become 'owned' by the vested interests, including, rather ironically, self-styled professional bodies and commercial bodies. Some of the professional bodies act like learning networks, others like guilds and others like commercial organizations.

In the following we would like to problematize the current situation and hope to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle. We want to suppose that everything we know about coaching education is wrong. Buckle up for the ride!

## **Who owns coaching?**

It's easy to forget that coaching is an evolution of multiple traditions embedded in the evolution of human society. The non-directive approach to personal development is found in the mysticism of India (from which Timothy Gallwey drew inspiration for *The Inner Game of Tennis*, (Gallwey, 1974) which is arguably the first exposition of modern coaching principles); in Sufism, from which we get the philosophy (note, not science) of the Enneagram; and in mentoring, which has at its core the acquisition of wisdom.

It's innate in professional bodies that they attempt to stamp their authority on the intellectual territories they seek to claim.

It's reminiscent of the European settlers placing their flags on land already inhabited by naïve aboriginals, ignorant of the fact that these people did not perceive themselves as owning the land but on being owned by the land. (Paradoxically, the remediation in recent decades has been to "return" ownership, so to some extent legitimizing the monocultural perspective of the invaders.)

Competition between the professional bodies can be seen in the context of establishing firmer and firmer title. Standards, competencies, rules and regulations become the weapons of choice. In a discipline that decries directive language like "ought", "should" and "must", that same vocabulary becomes essential to the control of the claimed territory. In a world, where greater valuing of diversity is essential, we see instead more and more energy spent in imposing intellectual monocultures.

This approach is contrary to the founding principles of the EMCC. We don't have knowledge of the founding ideals of the ICF. The land-grabbing of the European settlers happened because nobody bothered to listen to let alone value, the perspectives of those they dispossessed.

## **How different is what is happening in the world of coaching?**

If we redefine coaching as an innate quality of wise humanity, then the answer to the question "Who owns coaching?" is everyone. If no-one "owns" arithmetic, why is it so important to own coaching, which is at root another human attribute? One of us (David) is leading a project to enable five million school-age coaches and mentors. One of the intentions is to help these young people realise their own potential as well as that of the peers they support. Another intention is to release their creativity in how they approach the role. To straight-jacket their thinking by imposing a "right" way would undermine these intentions.

## **Being v doing**

The ongoing research into coach maturity (Rajasinghe, et al. 2022) indicates that to coach effectively, rather than go through the motions, we have to focus less on doing coaching and more on being a coach. It doesn't matter how many tools and techniques you have, what counts is how you integrate them into the relationship with the client. It's like the difference between someone reading from a joke book and a comedian who brings the narrative to life.

Yet course content is almost entirely about concept and technique (see below in our section on accreditation of coach training schools). What's missing is meaning – the integration of what we do with who we are. Myers and Bachkirova's (2018) experiments where coaches observed and evaluated how peers coached showed the sterility of a "concept and tools" approach. The coaches based their judgements on "did they do it the way I would", with little reflection on what they could learn from diverse approaches. The Rajasinghe, et al. (2022) research found the same attitudes to the 'tools' of coaching as experienced coaches let these go over time.

## **Current situation with coach education**

In coaching (and in many other professions that focus on helping people through talk), every case is different. An argument that it does not makes sense to categorize coaches into a four step (EMCC) or three step (ICF) taxonomy can also be made quite convincingly. Tatiana Bachkirova and Carmelina Lawton Smith (2015) even state that the "the approach taken by most professional bodies towards gradation of professional expertise is based on competency frameworks that are as yet unsubstantiated."

As mentioned above, professional associations are trying to put an end to the 'wild west' of coaching by setting standards and evaluating coaches' quality by their adherence to these standards. Yet even the way these standards were developed is arbitrary. They are based on an agreement of experts (often practitioners with vested interests) on what "good coaching" is. The context in which the coaching occurs, the culture, the aim, or the clients' needs is taken out of the equation. As mentioned above, this is completely unsatisfactory for a complex linguistic

collaborative task. As a comparator, would you set global standards for poetry?

There is a constant dilemma here, between the need to define what coaching is versus the tendency of definitions to exclude. A while ago, one of us was asked to advise on whether an “astrological coach” should be accepted into membership of one of the professional bodies. The conclusion was that this would contravene ethical principles relating to evidence-based practice and not endorsing chicanery. This begs the question as to what is acceptable evidence?

## The ICF philosophy of credentialing

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) calls their credentials and membership the “international gold standard”. Credential holders can demonstrate to potential customers that they have been through a rigorous process of testing their quality. Corporate customers as well as individual clients can “outsource” the due diligence to the credentialing body – anyone who achieved a credential with ICF, will know how to coach. Such is the theory.

In order to be able to assess the competency of a coach, the ICF created “Core Competencies”. The first version of the Core Competencies was created in 1998. ([The Gold Standard in Coaching | ICF - Core Competencies \(coachingfederation.org\)](#)). The coaching schools in the US wanted to pre-empt regulatory initiatives by the US government and rather self-regulate than being regulated by bodies that may or may not understand what coaching is. Representatives of the different coaching schools got together to determine how they recognize the competence of a coach irrespective of the different coaching models. ([The development of the ICF Core Competencies: old and new - Pamela Richarde / Kirsten Dierolf von ICF Germany \(anchor.fm\)](#)). In 2019, the 11 Core Competencies were updated and now consist of 8 Core Competencies.

The process that was used was a “job analysis process” and it was accompanied by HumMRO, a human resource consultancy. A job analysis is normally used when companies want to determine the fundamental requirements of a position in their businesses. The ICF, together with HumMRO started by convening an expert panel who identified “critical incidents” in coaching where coaches could either show good or poor performance. These critical incidents were then analysed by subject matter experts and observable good performance was identified. From the list of over 1000 behaviours, a survey was generated. This survey was shared with around 1300 of ICF and non-ICF coaches (International Coaching Federation) across the globe and the Core Competencies were developed as a huge abstraction from context, culture and clients. The ICF’s own survey of 2016 suggests that there are 53,300 professional coaches worldwide. If this is the case, the sample used to create the current competency framework represents approximately 2.4% of the coaching industry as identified by the ICF. Even more starkly, the business-related social media site LinkedIn estimate, by using their worldwide membership, that in 2019 there were 586,292 coaches worldwide. If this is the case, the ICF sample is approximately 0.22% of the total population (Nadeem, et al. 2021; Venkatesh, 2019).

Clients’ feedback did not play a role in this process nor were the various contexts of coaching considered where “coachee-specific variables such as disciplinary background, learning preferences, a calm and safe reflexive space and the enablement of critical thinking.” (Nadeem, et al. (2021, p:3) considered. Further, there is no information on how the job analysis was defined to accommodate these variables. Nadeem et al. (2021) argue that a “behavioural analysis” would be a more appropriate methodology. Also, the coaches who designed the critical incidents and who served as subject matter experts had mostly been trained in the existing Core Competencies, so to no-one’s great surprise the updated Core Competencies look very much like the old ones. However, the new ones are clearer, with less overlap and formulated in more easily observable language but, with the lack of these other elements listed above, their legitimacy remains doubtful.

Coaches’ knowledge of the competences is tested in the ICF credentialing system in two ways: candidates supply a recording in which these competencies are to be shown, and they take a multiple-choice test where they read a scenario and select an appropriate action (which in the best case demonstrates the respective competency).

To sum it up: “Lists of competencies, while a good starting point (Drake, 2011), provide a very restricted view of effective practice and bring a set of implications that may not be reflective of what is needed in the field (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015, p. 130). Moreover, the ‘good starting point’ argument breaks down when one considers the backgrounds (Hindle-Fisher, et al. 2023) of the start-up coach. It cannot be assumed that beginner coaches start from a zero base as is implied by the ‘competencies are alright for beginners’ argument.

## The EMCC philosophy of accreditation

The accreditation system of EMCC is based on “capability indicators” rather than “competencies”. A capability is something that the coach is theoretically able to do. The coach can opt for using the capability or refraining from using it depending on the situation at hand. This is also the reason why EMCC does not ask applicants to supply a coaching recording for performance evaluation.

The EMCC core standards were developed by academics. A number of existing models from coach training providers were analysed by the researchers. They then produced a preliminary structure which was sent out to many coaches via different coaching bodies. The researchers were able to collect several hundred of responses which were integrated to formulate the core standards document. (David Clutterbuck and David Lane, private communications).

David Lane described the development of the standards for accreditation to Kirsten in an email (to this date there is no public documentation that we could find):

“This was an elaborate process involving:

- a) a literature review of the field of coaching to identify core themes.
- b) a review of other professions and the models of accreditation used.
- c) a focus group of coaches and clients to explore what they saw as core necessary elements.
- d) interviews and documentary reviews of 20 training providers to explore what they had in common and to produce a framework for assessment.
- e) a framework was produced set against University (QAA) standards for practitioner and master level plus an introductory level. (Subsequently the other levels were added
- f) a model for accreditation of prior learning was created.

This was then shared with providers to see if it worked for them based on the principle of equivalence, that is, they did not have to copy it exactly but rather show how their approach was equivalent in standards and quality assurance.

A group of experienced coaches then received training in how to assess applications.

“First, they had to submit a portfolio of their own training and practice which was assessed by members of the group as practice. They were trained to look at both the level and amount of training to establish equivalence. They then applied this to example training provider submissions. Initially 20 providers were assessed.”

David Lane, private communication to Kirsten

The EMCC’s main focus in coach accreditation is to ensure that coaches engage in reflective practices and take regular supervision and continuous education. For an EMCC accreditation, candidates need reflections on their practice and map those to the respective capability indicators. Client feedback is required as are a number of hours of supervision, CPD and coaching experience.

This way of accrediting coaches is a bit more in line with what we can really say about coach development and also with a general coaching stance to human development. One might say

EMCC is development based and ICF is test based. We speculate that customers of coaching might feel safer with a test-based approach whereas coaches might feel more comfortable with a development-oriented approach.

## **Accredited trainings are training mainly (questionable) methodologies**

Coaching associations like EMCC and ICF not only set standards against which coaches measure themselves, they also accredit training programs which offer graduates an easier passage through the gate-keeping mechanisms of credentialing. Associations guarantee the quality of their accredited programs by ascertaining that what is taught in the programs matches their competency models. In order to accredit a coach training program with ICF and EMCC, a provider needs to produce documentation on organizational standards and documentation on what and how competences are being taught. Additionally, the ICF requires training schools to submit “performance evaluation” recordings of graduates which need to demonstrate the competencies at the level the program aspires to be accredited for. The EMCC requires a detailed description of learning objectives and teaching design which needs to be suitable for students to acquire the capabilities at the level. Programs also need to prove how they will observe that students have gained these capabilities.

There is a danger here of viewing coach education as a routine mechanism: input rookie coach, refine through standardized schooling mechanism, output coach at desired level.

Associations provide quality assurance for buyers of coach training by accrediting them. Therefore, one might assume that what is taught in accredited coach training is of high quality. One of the authors (Kirsten) reviewed the websites of 100 ICF ACTP (the highest possible accreditation up to 2022) accredited training programs. She copied the self-description of the coaching models taught and clustered the results, deleting singular mentions. In Figure 1, you can see that neurolinguistic programming (NLP) is mentioned most, followed by neuroscience, self-developed models, emotional intelligence, positive psychology, spirituality and ICF competencies as a model (which they were never designed as, see above). There is a rich smorgasbord of approaches, many double and triple mentions of co-taught models and incommensurate eclecticism. The validity of the underlying models is rarely questioned in the coaching community. However, many of the foundational arguments of NLP, internal structures which can be analysed and changed, body language analysis (Heap, 2008) or learning styles (Nancekivell, 2020), have been debunked and the validity of neuroscientific research for human interactions may be questioned philosophically as a mereological fallacy (Bennett, 2003). But the coaching community does not engage in these discussions and at least the ICF does not seem to mind what else is taught in the accredited programs as long as the competencies are being taught.

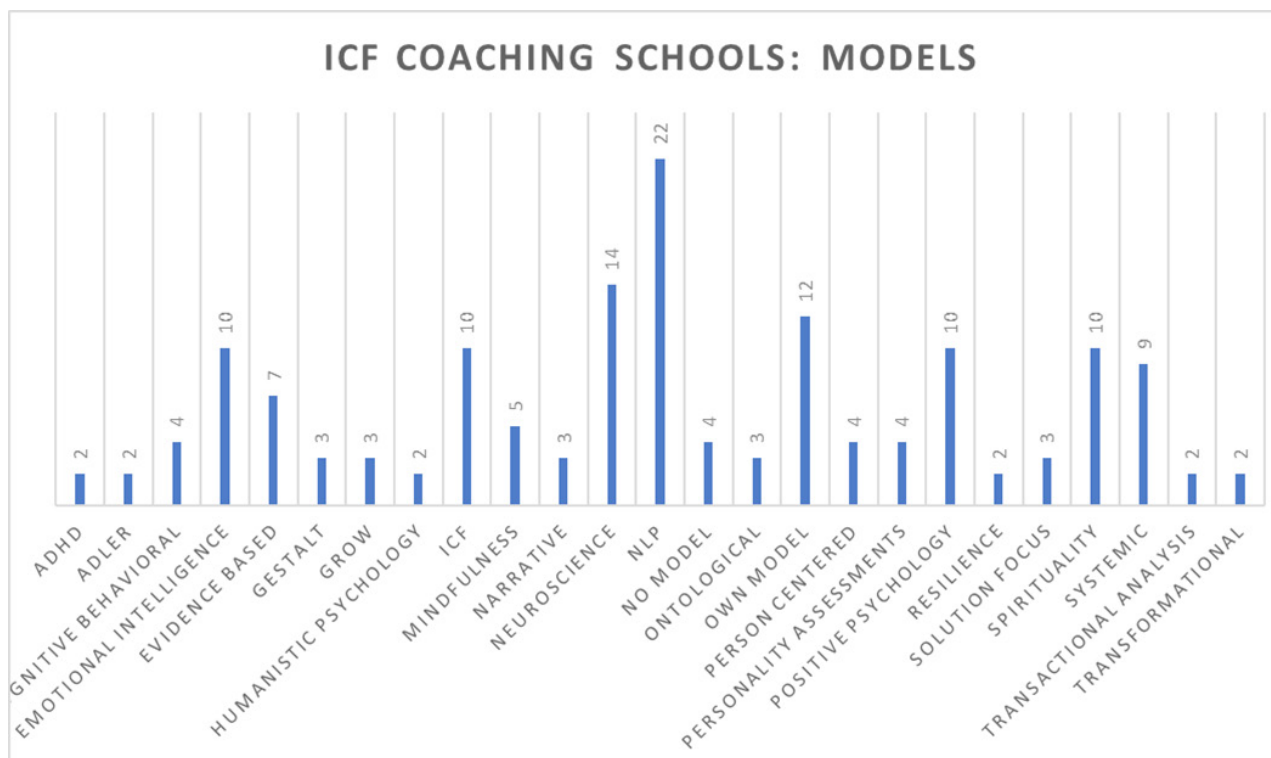


Figure 1

## What might a better curriculum look like?

### What might an alternative development programme look like for coaches?

There are many different kinds of coaching and all with different purposes, influenced by many different contexts and social discourses (see Stokes et al. 2020). As previously discussed, the current dominance of competence-based coach training, influenced by a ‘one best way’ discourse is inadequate. More seriously, Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) express concern that policy makers in the coaching bodies appear to ‘lack interest’ (p.124) in alternative approaches to competency frameworks and Hurlow (2022:27) argues that coaching bodies have a ‘powerful role’ in ‘legitimizing particular forms of coaching’, which, she argues is influenced by this ‘one best way’ thinking and that there is a need for these bodies to ‘promote a plurality of coaching approaches.’ In this way, the variations in the context and purpose of coaching may be addressed by coach educators. Further, Rajasinghe et al. (2022) found that the coaches in their sample actively sought a ‘plurality of approaches’ to their own development.

So, what might an alternative curriculum for coach education look like?

The notion of curriculum is central to educational debates. Bernstein (1971) raised four questions to help guide curriculum design. These are:

What is:

- valid knowledge
- a valid pedagogy
- a valid evaluation
- a valid realisation?

## Valid Knowledge

Raising the question of ‘what should a coach know’ is a challenge. For example, various aspects of psychology find their way into the coaching discourse. Berglas (2002) and Dean and Meyer, (2002) argue that only clinically trained therapists should coach, whereas Lee (2003)

is less assertive and introduces a scaled back position by suggesting that coaches should be 'psychologically minded' and Bluckert (2006) calls for coaches to be able to reflect on themselves, others and relationships. He goes on to say that this is best done with an awareness of psychological processes.

Is a knowledge of psychology necessary for the coach? Perhaps, 'yes'!

Therefore, a knowledge of psychology could be useful but, psychology has many branches (Garvey, 2011). In psychotherapy training, the final exams are managed by the educational institutions of the respective branches – a Solution Focused therapist would have to pass a different exam than a psychodynamic therapist. Nobody would assume that they would need to master the same skills. Coaches should know at least one foundational model and be able to distinguish between them in order to be able to gauge which coaching methodologies are commensurable with their approach and to avoid pragmatic eclecticism.

Coaching activity is also located within various social contexts and therefore a knowledge of sociology might be helpful for the coach. For example, the concept of discourse, concepts of power dynamics and political behaviour could be helpful, an understanding of culture and diversity, could also be helpful.

Garvey et al. (2014) argue that philosophy also contributes to the coaching discourse. It is often underplayed and yet philosophy brings insights into morality and ethics as well as, in the case of research philosophy, an understanding of what constitutes appropriate evidence of success in coaching.

Then there is knowledge of skills and practices. Which of the many thousands of coaching models and the skills and techniques associated with them should form part of the coach education curriculum? This is not an easy question to answer! The Rajasinghe et al. (2022) research shows that coaches have knowledge of very varied and individualistic topics.

## Valid Pedagogy

The issue of pedagogy raises potential issues of power and conflict in the sense that 'pedagogy' implies that the 'teacher' is the holder of the knowledge and Bernstein (1971) suggests that this lowers learner autonomy with the assumption being that the learner needs to be taught. This issue appeared in our research project (see Rajasinghe et al. 2022) and as raised earlier in this paper, with coach training courses assuming that the beginner coach has no knowledge or experience. This is at odds with the professed philosophical position in coaching, where the coachee is an expert in their own life and work (see, Grant, 2006; Drake, 2010; O'Connell and Palmer, 2018). Applying this idea to coach education would seem appropriate and it is here that the notion of andragogy, rather than pedagogy could be considered.

Knowles (1980) outlined six elements of andragogy for adults:

1. need to know the reason for learning something
2. learn experientially
3. need to be responsible and involved in the planning and evaluation of their learning
4. are most interested in learning things relevant to themselves
5. need a problem-based approach for learning rather than a content-based approach
6. tend to be self-motivated rather than need external motivation.

The andragogic approach resonates more with the professed coaching philosophy of a coachee centred approach. This would include coaches being supported to critically reflect on their experiences of coaching and to offer insights into themselves as they develop their coaching identity. To extend this position further, Rogers, (1961:281) present the idea of 'the core conditions for learning. These are:

- self-organisation and genuine flexibility;



- creativity and open dialogue;
- individual responsibility, control and authority;
- security, empathy;
- extensive and open information exchange;
- a climate of trust based on mutual respect and genuineness;
- unconditional positive regard for other people;
- an ability to communicate all these to others (Rogers, 1961:281)

Applying these conditions to facilitate coach education suggests that the environment plays an essential part in creating the condition for learning and growth and these 'conditions' may be difficult to create in a training environment. Issues such as pre-specified learning outcomes (as implied by competency frameworks) become a problem and the issue of 'valid knowledge' becomes contestable. A competence-based approach, which dominates the professional coaching associations and their approach to accreditation and training, may, indeed, as raised above in Hurlow, (2022) imply a 'one best way'. Whilst this may be compatible with the professionalisation agenda it does not support or even acknowledge that there is a plurality of approaches to coaching.

The Rajasinghe et al. (2022) found that coaches tend to learn by doing and in a variety of ways, both formally and informally. A central feature that was found was the coaches continued intent to keep learning.

## Valid evaluation

Taking the andragogic route here would involve coaches having a strong input into any evaluation of their coaching skills and knowledge. This could include critically reflective writing, peer observation of skills, processes and techniques and peer feedback.

## Valid realisation

Realisation is to do with how the learning, derived from the curriculum is enacted in practice. Here, there is a need for ongoing development as identified in Rajasinghe et al. (2022). This research shows that a developed or experienced coach is always in the state of becoming because it is this attitude that enables the developing coach to learn, refresh and continue to grow. The one best way approach may lead to stagnation and the embodiment of the phrase attributed to Abraham Maslow if you "only have a hammer everything looks like a nail". This would not serve coaches particularly well!

## What might the programme look like?

With the challenges outlined above, what might the programme for coach education look like?

Rajasinghe et al. (2022) argue that there is no destination in a coach's learning and that coaches are often in a constant state of becoming. As far as a formal education process is concerned and based on our experience of delivery, we suggest that the duration of a programme may be approximately one year part-time.

A suggested programme:

## Practice of education

- Creating a safe environment for experimentation and learning: e.g. establishing ground rules, building trust and rapport among the participants, constructively dealing with criticism and feedback to facilitate co-learning.
- Discovering and exploring the participants' background and experience as resources for the

development of coaching skills and identity.

- Partnering with participants as able adult learners, i.e. the educator is more in the role of a coach than an instructor.
- Flexibility of the coach training program – driven by participants' needs rather than instructor plans, accreditation needs by associations, etc.
- Establishing a feedback culture concerning the effectiveness of the coach training that is built on partnering with participants as active learners (rather than consumers whose satisfaction can be “measured” by surveys).
- Supporting reflexive practice and the associated skills of self-observation, critical analysis and experimentation

## **Creating an environment for the development of coaching skills**

- Focus of core skills of centring the client, supporting the client in the quality of their thinking, partnering with the client, through listening, asking insight provoking questions, inviting clients' reflections, making observations and leaving their interpretation to the client, appropriate use of coach's self, etc.
- Focus of critical reflections on practical experiences through coaching each other, furthering deliberate practice.
- Working with real coaching recordings and mentoring / supervision.
- Practicing not only with fellow students but with “real” clients who do not have experience of coaching.
- Conscious selections of practice coaching partners for diversity.
- Developing supportive appreciative enquiry-based feedback, peer supported observations of practice, action learning sets, etc.
- Using reflective diaries

## **Creating an environment for the development of a coaching identity**

- Critical appreciation of paradigms underpinning coaching approaches (e.g. philosophical, psychological, sociological)
- Critical appreciation of various coaching approaches and frameworks
- Awareness of the complexity of ethical issues in today's environment, development of own ethical framework and its integration to personal practice
- Developing a coaching identity

## **Where do we go from here?**

As the coaching professional industries “matures”, we can see increasingly clearly the tensions that come from simplistic or reductionist approaches to coach education (and certification). Coaching is a complex activity and cannot be reduced to simplistic evaluation criteria or curricula.

While the need of buyers of coaching to be able to identify high quality coaches is understandable and justified, addressing this need on the part of coaching associations should not result in a detriment to the practice of coaching. Coaching approaches are diverse and contextual and therefore not amenable to standardization. Labelling coaching a profession “corrals” coaching, puts a fence on one small piece of land that is defined as “coaching land” while leaving out all the other plots of land. It could equally be argued that coaching is a vocation or something in between which we might call a pro-vocation.

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