

Using coaching tools to develop professional practice holistically

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journals.sagepub.com/home/bir**Sarah Wolfenden** *Brunel University London, Uxbridge, UK*

Abstract

Do you teach or train others? Are you passionate about delivering a great learning experience to them? Are you considering working towards professional accreditation and have been putting it off? Are you tired of faffing around and want to get your focus back? Are you ambitious but concerned about burning out? Do you need some space and time – where no-one is vying for your attention – to gain clarity, develop your practice and explore how you can be of service to your participants, your colleagues and your loved ones while not losing yourself in the process? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then you may find this article helpful. Its aim is to provide an overview of a few select tools to help teaching and training professionals articulate their purpose, craft a teaching identity and philosophy, and get the most out of training received – with a few self-care tips thrown in for good measure! As we move to a world where increasingly roles are being replaced by automation, we need to focus on what makes us individual, personalised humans (Gleeson, 2018). I hope that this article will provide a starting point.

Keywords

Professional development, academic practice, lifelong learning, wellbeing, coaching

Do you teach or train others? Have you been putting off working towards professional accreditation? Do you need some space and time – where no-one is vying for your attention – to gain clarity, develop your practice and explore how you can be of service to your participants, your colleagues and your loved ones while not losing yourself? This article aims to provide an overview of a few select tools to help teaching and training professionals articulate their purpose, craft a teaching identity and philosophy, and get the most out of training received – with a few self-care tips thrown in for good measure. As we move to a world where automation increasingly replaces professional roles, it is important to focus on what makes us individual (Gleeson, 2018). I hope that this article will provide a starting point.

The benefits of having a teaching identity and philosophy

A teaching philosophy is an account of how we understand the teaching and learning process, and our place in it. Crafting our teaching identity and developing a teaching philosophy helps us to know ourselves (Ashwin, 2015). The two are intertwined: If we do not know ourselves we cannot assume to know those we train or teach. A teaching philosophy can help us articulate our personal values and beliefs

and to crystallise the way these impact on our practice. This helps align decision-making with our personal ethical codes. For example, when considering participation and engagement it makes it easier to answer questions like:

- Do we encourage group work?
- Do we use icebreakers?
- Do we allow facial recognition software to monitor engagement?

In writing a teaching philosophy, it can be helpful to start thinking about our own experiences as learners in the different contexts in which we have engaged in learning. We can consider questions such as:

- What were our own teachers like?
- What did we like or dislike about them?
- What were our fears while we were learning?
- What impact did those fears have on our learning?
- Which ideas and topics have stayed in our memories because of the way someone taught us?

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It is then often helpful to reflect on what we think teaching and learning are. How does what we do in a classroom, lecture theatre, training space, online space or one-to-one fit these ideas? For example, if we say that we value time do we ensure we are prepared, organised and respectful of other's time too? Other important questions are 'why am I in this role?' How did I get here? What do I want my legacy to be? Identifying our values can help us to understand our personal teaching philosophy.

Ultimately, a teaching philosophy is an account of how we see our values and our identity demonstrated in our support of learners. These values may include: adventure, commitment, courage, freedom, respect, responsibility, security and so on. Brené Brown has a list of such values on her website and choosing our top three can enable us to get a handle on our purpose (Brown, 2018). While we may believe, or like to believe, that we live by many of these only a select few can truly guide the choices we make and the path we take. I sometimes get asked for example if we should have a different set for work and another for home. It may also be worth considering whether our goals and values match those of our institutions or departments. If they do not, can we live with that and find meaning still? Understanding our teaching philosophy and values requires honesty and self-reflection. Below I have exemplified this process in reflection on my own teaching practice.

My approaches to coaching, wellbeing and teaching philosophies

As a teacher and trainer of others – from information literacy and digital identities to academic practice – I have developed my own style, approach and belief system. These approaches to coaching, education and wellbeing align and are articulated in my teaching philosophy. My teaching philosophy centres on three core values – fairness, growth and determination

- Fairness – I strive for a fair and democratic education that does not take place solely in the classroom and that takes place wherever, and for how long, we wish it to.
- Growth – I am an advocate for continual lifelong learning that suits the place and time we find ourselves in.
- Determination – I provide strategies which enable resilience. We can be overwhelmed by huge shifts in our circumstances and/or perspectives so I focus on what is present, on what we can control, and on the little tweaks we can make to keep on developing while also accepting our current situation.

In my own practice, the most important parts of teaching, training and coaching are caring and the development of potential. Caring about and respecting the individual and

their hopes and dreams; caring about society and our place within it; and caring about the environment and our impact upon it. I care that those I have interacted with, whether it be in my workshops, retreats, or one-to-one coaching, go away having received something of value, having increased in their learning and grown in some way. Learning creates a shift; a change in a person's thoughts, perceptions and actions. This impacts on those around them. I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to develop their potential and that if people could improve what they do, even by 10%, this would improve the environment we live in.

This idea of care also brings self-care in too – for years I over exhausted myself trying to be all things to all people. It was only when I committed to discovering who I truly was and caring for my own wellbeing that I started to become a better teacher and practitioner. Like Palmer (2017, p. 1), I 'project the condition of my soul onto my students'. In an environment where people are constantly busy, I now provide a grounding, a calmness and an opportunity to make gentle shifts in direction and thoughts.

So far this states what I expect of myself. Part of my teaching philosophy also entails what I expect of others. In my teaching and in my coaching, I expect my participants to produce content. Everyone's presence and voice are valued (hooks, 1994, p. 8). By creating an open community like this there is risk and vulnerability on part of everyone in the room and, as bell hooks states, there needs to be some deconstruction of 'classroom' dynamics, i.e. that it is not solely the practitioner responsible for them. One of the ways I do this is by starting my training by introducing the principles of respectful enquiry (Van Quaquebeke and Felps, 2016) which emphasises the need to hear everybody's stories, to contribute and be aware of one's own responses to what is occurring in the room.

Why I take a coaching approach

I take a coaching approach because it gives control back to the student or member of staff in front of me. In a time where news of academic stress and lack of trust in management seems to be at an all-time high (Erickson et al, 2020; O'Brien and Guiney, 2019) while staff mental health is considered 'foundational' (Universities UK, 2020), coaching can give a sense of autonomy and a chance to feel in control once more (ILM, 2018). It enables people to realise what they can and cannot control and reflect and engage with their teaching practices for the benefits of those they teach (Foltos, 2014; ILM, 2018). It enables staff to realise their potential (ILM, 2018). They discover answers they already have, articulate them and become more confident (ILM, 2018) Coaching 'emphasises reflection, self-analysis and self-evaluation' which assists educators in considering their teaching practices. This is empowering and means they are more likely to take responsibility and put their

thoughts into actions (Devine et al., 2013). I personally find coaching outside is particularly helpful in aiding reflection.

When I used to be a HE (Higher Education) in FE (Further Education) librarian, I would teach on the education courses which were comprised mainly of women returning to work, often after having taken time out looking after their children. Their children had left home and a significant number had experienced relationship breakdowns. I never asked them this but they wanted to tell me (the plight of librarian face!). For them, being in the classroom was a rebellious act (hooks, 1994). They were bringing their whole self and by acknowledging that whole self they found the confidence to put their energies and motivation more fully into their studies – rather than tip-toeing around the fringes. This experience galvanised my approach and encouraged me to learn more and continue in this way.

Going forwards, information professionals, academics and all those who support learning are best placed to use a coaching approach as we all want to create independent critical thinkers. We may have been told ‘what would I do without you’ by grateful students and exhausted academics or other professionals we support, when really the aim could be to receive the comment, ‘you supported me to help myself’. While my activities may change, my approach will not as it is governed by my values and teaching philosophy. I would encourage anyone who cares about supporting and developing others and whose aim is to inspire and create a rewarding experience to: create a teaching philosophy, use self-coaching techniques and use a coaching approach in their practice.

Finding our real purpose

Having a clearly defined purpose can aid momentum when general motivation levels have dissipated (Locke and Latham, 1990). This is an exercise I have found useful to help think deeply and honestly about why we are in our chosen profession or role. It can often unearth our true values and motivations, for example: family, security, fear etc. It is a widely popularised activity found online building on Simon Sinek’s book *Start with Why* (Sinek, 2011). It is called Seven Levels Deep and is accredited to an American business coach and consultant, Jo Stump, employed by author and real-estate investor Dean Graziosi to help him market his work (WisdomClips, 2018). For all its showiness, it is a powerful exercise.

It starts with the questions ‘why do you want to do [insert activity, for example, CILIP Fellowship or Advance HE accreditation] and the answer might be – ‘because I want to achieve credibility and validation for my work’. We then go another level deeper and ask of that answer - ‘why do you want to do that?’ and the answer this time might be ‘because I want to remain employable in the field I am in’, and so on. It is an incredibly personal exercise and I recommend you do it alone. It can strike at the very core

of our identity and personality and lead to some tough questions being asked, usually around 4/5 levels in. The first time I did this I cried for about 10 minutes! Brené Brown, an advocate of expressing vulnerability to grow, informs us of our need to put down our armour, invite and inspect our vulnerabilities to flourish and be courageous (Brown, 2018). This exercise is a great one for inspecting those vulnerabilities within a safe environment.

Tools for reflecting on practice and continual professional development

Reflection is a key part of pedagogy and developmental practice. As a tool it is common among teachers, coaches, trainers and counsellors – all those who help others learn (Candy et al, 1985). One way to reflect is to consider our ‘key gifts and strengths as a teacher’ (Palmer, 2017). How do these manifest themselves in the classroom? When things go well? And when they do not? Palmer asks us to consider a moment when we start to get in trouble in a teaching situation but become mindful of the fact and can rectify the situation within time. He asks in relation to this, how can we ‘live more gracefully within our limits’ and what does this look like? I do not believe he is necessarily saying we should constrain our ambition, quite the opposite, I believe he is emphasising how important it is to know ourselves thoroughly and be mindful of our responses (Palmer, 2017).

Journaling

Reflective writing can be a useful tool, either through journaling or the use of stream of conscious scribbling to reveal and manage emotion; for example, morning pages (morning pages are three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing done first thing in the morning) are meant to help reflect and restore a sense of safety, freedom, identity and power (Cameron, 2016). Reflective journaling can take place daily, weekly or solely after each teaching practice. It’s completely up to you, although the best approach is to choose a method and persevere with it, even if not consistently (Datu et al, 2016).

Here are some questions to consider when journaling:

- How are we ‘performing’ for students? To what extent does this create a barrier between ourselves and those we teach?
- How comfortable did participants feel asking questions in class? Did they all wait to the end to ask them?
- How am I connecting with my subject?
- How am I connecting with my students? Which methods are working and which are not?

- What are we most afraid of in the classroom? If this, is something that has happened, how did I deal with it? How would you deal with it?
- What are my students afraid of? How is this showing up in the classroom?

Communities of practice

While the above activities can take place within a group setting or as an individual, many of the activities mentioned are individual ones. While these have value it also important to reflect as part of a community. To have a mirror shone on us. For example, we may know something needs improving and it remains a niggle we cannot identify, so we put off addressing it. When we talk this out or someone observes it they may offer a different perspective for us to consider. When participating in communities of practice, Palmer (2017) advocates carefully selecting physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual spaces where we are not distracted, where open and honest discussion can flourish safely and people are free to speak their truth while respecting that of others. Consider what a healthy community means to you. What does it look like? What type of people are in it? How do they listen? How do they seek information? How do we address the balance of trusting our own judgement and of relying too much on what the group agrees?

This is not an exhaustive list of reflective activities, by any means, and there are many books and articles which go into greater detail. I would recommend finding a way that works for you; try a range and be willing to let go of the ego. Often the answers are inside us and need a little help to coax them out. When potential ideas really are beyond our scope of reference, due to lack of awareness or experience, this is when communities of practice and the creation of networks come into their own. Twitter chats, mentors, listserv lists and general discourse are further examples and may all help us to consider new ways of working,

Activity (Identifying what is in our control and what is not)

This is an exercise for when we are feeling frustrated and helpless about a situation. It is one I recommend when I hear ‘this would not work for me’ or ‘there is no point trying this because I have no control over (class size, time, location etc) . . . I use it myself when feeling overwhelmed. Yes, trying every tool or technique going and hoping something works can be a bit of a scattergun approach – like throwing spaghetti at a wall in the hope some of it sticks – and it can become messy. There are many variations of this tool online and it can be used for different purposes. You will need sticky notes, a pen and a piece of paper:

1. Thinking of a specific issue, perhaps a training session or a situation you are in, draw a circle on a piece of paper.
2. Using sticky notes, write down everything you can think of involved in the delivery of that session (preparation, resources, content etc) or concerns you have about the situation you are in and put in the circle. This is your circle of concern.
3. Now put a smaller circle in the middle. Pick up each post-it and look at it. Move anything from the larger circle you have some form of control over, no matter how small. This is your circle of control.

What does that look like now? Do you find you have more that you can control than you first realised? If you cannot see anything you have control over, try delving deeper. For example, in a training session, what examples do you refer your participants to? How do you turn up to the session? How do you encourage engagement? By doing this exercise it should be just that little bit easier to focus on something you do want to develop rather than becoming overwhelmed by everything seeming insurmountable.

What next – Which tool will you start with?

In this overview of the various tools and techniques we might use to gain clarity and develop our practice, we have considered the benefits of using a coaching approach. We have started crafting a teaching identity and formulating a philosophy based on this – as well as our values. We have considered briefly how to select our values and we have undertaken an exercise to discover the real reasons we show up every morning. We have lightly touched on how we can reflect on our professional practice and utilise development activities without feeling overwhelmed – using resources such as journaling, communities of practice, and the circle of concern activity to help us focus. The days of being a professional robot are over and people will increasingly be bringing their whole selves to work. Emotional intelligence, kindness and compassion will be paramount to look after ourselves as well as those we serve. This will show up by finding a purpose behind the work we do, reflecting on it and seeking to continually learn. What’s your next action going to be?

About me:

A little about me to put this into context: I am a Senior Lecturer in Academic Practice, performance coach and chartered information professional with sixteen years’ experience teaching and supporting learning in the UK further and higher education sector. I am a Senior Fellow of Advance HE. I coach, teach and train academics and information professionals to achieve their workplace and

personal goals and to reflect upon and develop their teaching practices. I also work with them towards achieving professional accreditation.

I have supported others in their teaching, learning and assessment practices for much of my career in the tertiary sector. After a brief stint in factories, retail and then hospitality - where I learned a fair bit about human behaviour - I worked as a librarian in the further education sector; within higher education in further education; and then solely in higher education. I have mentored and supervised small teams and set up centres; designing them to be inclusive, safe and provide a welcoming and mindful atmosphere.

Additionally, I volunteer in my workplace's wellbeing team providing mindfulness workshops. I am a member of a coaching community where I help staff pursue workplace goals while maintaining their wellbeing. I am a mum of two and have recently started my yoga teacher training certificate. I believe in bringing the whole self to whatever area of life we are focusing on and in a professional manner. This means there are many overlaps between my interests in wellbeing and mindful living with continuous development and lifelong learning.


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Author biography

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