

<b>Serial number</b>	0040
<b>Title</b>	Coaching in Higher Education: Light and Shadow
<b>Session</b>	CHEER Symposium, SRHE Conference 2017: Affect in Academia: Policy Shadows and Perplexing Subjectivities (Morley)
<b>Author</b>	Dr. Mariam Attia

## **Coaching in Higher Education: Light and Shadow**

### **1 Introduction**

Drawing on research in the fields of coaching and higher education, and on my own experience of coaching in the sector, this paper problematizes the use of coaching in a rapidly changing academia. It invites a critical analysis of the purposes and processes involved, and calls for more meaningful integration.

### **2 The Drive to Thrive**

In 1961, Carl Rogers argued that within every person there is an innate tendency to flourish and prosper. Such tendency can be hidden under layers of psychological defenses awaiting an opportunity to manifest itself.

Whether one calls it a growth tendency, a drive toward self-actualization, or a forward-moving directional tendency, it is the mainspring of life ... It is the urge which is evident in all organic and human life – to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature – the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, to the extent that such activation enhances the organism or the self. (p. 35)

Generally, supporting this ‘forward-facing directional tendency’ has been the rationale for using coaching, which might explain the intricate relationship between this approach and positive psychology (van Nieuwerburgh & Green 2014), through the approach itself has drawn from several other disciplines (Cox, Bashkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014). As a socially-mediated model to internal growth, coaching offers a space for individuals to unlock their potential and develop.

### **3 The Context of Higher Education**

Emerging research into the integration of coaching into academia highlights the potential that the approach may have for professional services, scholars and students alike (Iordanou, Iech and Barnes, 2015). Amidst busy professional lives, it offers a sanctuary for thinking and reflection, and for actively progressing from exploration to discovery and action. The

approach can be applied to purely intellectual matters, to project planning or career progression, to the formulation of research ideas or funding proposals, or to other issues of personal or interpersonal significance. Further, through engaging in non-judgemental communication for an agreed period of time, staff and students have the opportunity to explore a discourse that is different from debates, argumentation and discussion, which prevail in academia. However, considering the evolving principles and purposes of higher education today, a careful examination is needed for how and why coaching is introduced and promoted.

It is no secret that the sector is undergoing rapid commodification, which have – among other things - produced academic cultures of performativity (Ball, 2012; Olssen & Peters, 2005), and therefore contexts of high-pressure, low-trust and/or isolation. Therein lies the danger of introducing coaching as yet another ‘intervention’ to help people ‘cope’. In such contexts, the approach could be perceived as a space for individuals to “confess” shortcomings and set new targets for themselves to increase productivity (Ball, 2012, p. 19). In fact, Iordanou and colleagues (2015) associate the introduction of coaching to higher education to the increasingly outcome-driven sector. The approach itself is often linked to enhancing performance, which has led to recent calls, from within the field, for revisiting its scope so it fosters wellbeing in the workplace (Oades, 2016; van Nieuwerburgh, 2016).

In result-driven academic cultures, coaching could also be misused to reinforce structural inequalities (e.g., through limiting coaching to certain categories of people) or established hegemonies (e.g., through policies of involuntary engagement). The absence of clear policies for how information emerging from the coaching sessions will be stored, who will have access to them and under what conditions may also act as a major deterrent. Further, coaching could be misused as a more “socially acceptable” alternative to counselling or therapy (Cavanagh & Buckley, 2014, p. 412) and perceiving the approach as ‘remedial’ can attach a stigma to it, thereby sabotaging its potential.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Coaching is no panacea for the ills of the sector. On the contrary, as stated by Du Toit & Sim (2012, p. 5), the approach should challenge the established state of affairs and contribute to revealing institutional realities. The authors argue that since the basic philosophy of coaching lies in humanistic psychology which looks into supporting people to prosper and grow, if the approach is to serve its purpose, it “needs to develop a sharper and more critical edge through which to confront the practices and assumptions of individuals and organizations” (p.5). Developing a deeper understanding of the underlying purposes and practices of introducing coaching to academia will contribute to more meaningful integration allowing staff and students to become more purposeful in their choices, and to take ownership of their own development processes.

#### **References**

Ball, S. J. (2012). Performativity, commodification and commitment: An I-spy guide to the neoliberal university. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60(1), 17-28.

Cavanagh, M. & Buckley, A. (2014). Coaching and mental health. In E. Cox, T. Bashkirova, and D. Clutterbuck (Eds.), *The Complete handbook of coaching* (pp. 405-417). London: Sage.

Cox, E., Bashkirova, T., & Clutterbuck, D. (2014). Introduction. In E. Cox, T. Bashkirova, and D. Clutterbuck (Eds.), *The Complete handbook of coaching* (pp. 1-18). London: Sage.

Du Toit, A. & Sim, S. (2012). *Rethinking coaching: Critical theory and the economic crisis*. New York: Pelgrave Mcmillan.

Iordanou, I., Iech, A. and Barnes, V. (2015). Coaching in Higher Education. In C. van Nieuwerburgh (Ed.), *Coaching in professional contexts* (pp. 145-158). London: Sage.

Oades, L. G. (2016). Coaching for wellbeing at work. IN C. van Nieuwerburgh (Ed.), *Coaching in professional contexts* (pp. 199-212). London: Sage.

Olssen, M & Peters, M. A. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 20(3), 313-345.

Rogers, C. (1961/2004). *On becoming a person*. London: Constable.

van Nieuwerburgh, C. (2016, April 3). 'Coaching in professional contexts' Book Launch. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TM\\_kL7H-q7U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TM_kL7H-q7U)

van Nieuwerburgh, C. & Green, S. (2014). Developing mental toughness in young people: coaching as an applied positive psychology. In D. Strycharczyk & P. Clough (Eds.), *Developing mental toughness in young people for the twenty first century*. London: Karnac.