Academic Paper

Using the Romantics to understand the imagination: A creative and original methodology for research into coaching

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Abstract

It could be argued that imagination is a necessary counterweight to reason if coaches are to help clients make truly informed decisions. The use of imagination in coaching is under-researched. Much coaching research draws from psychotherapy and psychology. In this article, I show what we can learn from close and critical reading of literature. Adapting discourse-historical analysis I synthesise an idea of the Romantic imagination. Such imagination is revealed as an essential human attribute, with metaphysical characteristics, susceptible to nurture. The findings suggest how coaches and clients can embrace Keats' 'negative capability'. This article is a necessary contribution to coaching research which shows how the literary canon can provide valuable insights for coaches.

Introduction

Coaching texts are largely silent on the subject of imagination. This article describes how I addressed the research question "How can coaches harness the Romantic imagination to serve their clients?" I show how close engagement with works of literature offers coaches insights which do not emerge from the fields of scholarship which inform mainstream coaching research. Imagination – the willingness to wonder 'what's happening here' sits at the heart of great discoveries (Holmes, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and small ones too. The research question arose from my observation that the more broadly clients (and I) can think about an issue, and the more openly we consider alternatives, the more committed they can be to the course of action they chose.

The ability to conjure and manipulate different worlds and views of the world – which we call imagination - broadens choice and makes us aware of what we are choosing. It "is so essential to

mental activity that its elimination would radically alter the character of man's mind" (Casey, 1974, p. 3). Imaginative powers vary between individuals (Puente-Díaz and Cavazos-Arroyo, 2017; Claxton, 2005; Blackmore, 2003; Frank, 1978). I wanted to know how coaches can nourish these powers and, in doing so, meet Hardingham's challenge to 'increase the range of choices open to the coachee.' (2004, p. 30).

Imagination 'has resisted comprehensive, systematic characterization' (Spaulding, 2016, p. 2). Scholars such as Warnock (1976), Frye (1964), Dewey (1934) do not concur on every detail. This seemed to me scant reason not to attempt a characterization of the imagination based on evidence, and then to apply it to coaching. I was introduced to the Romantic poets as an A-level student and have been fascinated by their treatment of imagination for the succeeding 35 years. This prompted me to seek answers in their writing. The research question, "How can coaches harness the Romantic imagination to serve their clients?" begs an inductive approach. I adopted, and adapted, the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009) because of its applicability to research questions with a social dimension and its reliance on analysis of texts. This method sat well with my own interpretivist paradigm and my prior experience of literary criticism, which influenced my research question. This is an original approach characterised by 'powerful, personal authorship' (Holliday, 2016, p. 127) and by Gabriel's (2015) call for imaginative methodology, as befits my subject. My findings invite further research along these lines and into this topic. I invite coaches to test my findings in their practice, if they believe they will serve their clients.

How to further coaching research

Researchers and teachers of coaching and mentoring (e.g. Peltier, 2010; Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 2014; Smithers, 2011) focus repeatedly on the fields of psychology and psychotherapy yet as Alvesson and Gabriel remind us "slavish adherence to formula renders researchers oblivious to potentially interesting possibilities that exist outside the formula" (2013, p. 247). Coaching research rarely acknowledges that psychology and psychotherapy are relatively recent ways of thinking about what it is to be human. This focus is occasionally (Smithers, 2011), though certainly not always, "slavish adherence".

Additionally, much coaching research takes place within social science faculties, where "dominant methodologies generally adhere to an ultra-rationalist paradigm of scientific discovery" (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013, p. 249). Many of the papers I read while completing my Masters, despite being qualitative in their approach, appeared to be seeking the implied respectability of quantitive methodologies. I began to understand, and occasionally share, Tracy's (2010) sense they were trying on their bigger sibling's clothes to convince the grown-ups they had something important to say.

It is sixty years since C.P. Snow spoke of "two cultures" (Snow and Collini,1993) lamenting artificial distinctions between the humanities and sciences and the impact this would have on society's ability to fix itself. The methodologies applied by so many researchers seem to ignore Snow and something is missed because of this.

Why research imagination? And where to look for the data?

A literature review revealed that coaching texts (e.g. Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2014; Bachkirova, 2011; Flaherty, 2010; Linder-Pelz, 2010; Peltier, 2010; Van Deurzen and Hanaway, 2012) pay scant attention to the nature and activation of the imagination. Rather they take it for granted that it exists and move on, occasionally referencing creativity or mental imagery. The former is a product of imagination (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), the latter only one aspect of it

(Mendoza-Canales, 2018; Peijnenburg, 2006). Other fields – business, education and psychotherapy – acknowledge its importance without revealing its essence. This seems like trying to start an engine in second gear. This may be because of Piaget's association of imagination with a childlike state of innocence (Archambault and Venet, 2007); because of its association with psychosis (Singer and Pope, 1978); or because of a tendency to view it is as "second rate in status" compared to other mental activity (Casey, 1974, p. 4), "irresponsible" (Sutton-Smith, 1988, p. 17), or less "dependable" than scientific Reason (Eisner, 2002, p. 5).

Coaching's limited engagement with the idea left me wondering where I could learn about imagination. Fortunately, there exists a large body of data, gathered over six millennia, about what it is to be human. These data lie in stories written over that time, from the Assyrian Gilgamesh epic of 4000BC to Helen Fielding's recent reimagining of an Austen heroine as Bridget Jones. Literature offers, in effect, a grounded theory of the human condition. Booker (2004) shows us how themes recur over time, indicating that the data are saturated. Freud himself is said to have to have attributed the discovery of the subconscious to poets (Berman, 1985). To give just one example, *Don Quijote*, (Cervantes de Saavedra, 1605) is the story of a man trying to scale the heights of what we now call Maslow's triangle and discovering that you need a full belly before you go tilting at the windmills of self-actualization.

So I had a hunch that literature might have something to tell coaches, but I've spent all my adult life studying literature and I naturally look for answers in it. Wider reading was essential to establish if my hunch withstood academic scrutiny. I reviewed the scholarship which seeks to derive learning about the human condition from the "continuity between … works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience"(Dewey, 1934).

We attend to stories for many reasons and in doing so we can begin to "formulate the unformulated" (Iser, 1972, p. 299). Authors of fiction create a thought laboratory for testing ideas about life (Oatley, 1999, 2009). This suggests that literature grounded in shared, recognisable experience can provoke an imaginative approach to making sense of the world. Coaches and clients may find this approach more accessible than psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches because of its resemblance to everyday life. A few themes dominate in the scholarship which seeks to consider how fiction can offer insights into the human condition. I explore three of these below and consider how they are relevant to coaching.

i. Metacognition

Metacognition – or what we know about how we know – is seen as being essential for self-knowledge, and therefore for development (Lyons and Bandura, 2018). Our responses to reading fiction can help us to understand how we see the world, and why we see it that way (Newton, 1991), develop "new thinking skills" (Buswick et al., 2005, p. 34) and provoke "subtle shifts" in our self-knowledge (Djikic et al., 2009, p. 28). The development of metacognition is essential for coaches as part of reflective practice (Van der Horst and Albertyn, 2018) so if reading fiction can facilitate reflection on the self (Koopman and Hakemulder, 2015) then these activities can support both coach and client in this sensitive area of work.

ii. Metaphor

The study of poetry helps develop the cognitive as well as affective thinking (Eva-Wood, 2008). Metaphor connects these, (Van Buskirk et al, 2015). One advantage of the use of metaphor in coaching lies in its rendering the hard to grasp in familiar and readily visualised terms (Drake, 2014, Emson, 2016) . Metaphor enriches storytelling, and is therefore be valuable for coaching corporate clients (Auvinen et al., 2013). Familiarity with literature will enrich our use of metaphor (Miall and Kuiken, 2002), which will reduce the risk of reducing the complex to platitudes.

iii. Empathy

Coaches need empathy to ensure our questions are more than mere "interrogation"(Tschennen-Moran, 2014). It is an integral element of the emotional intelligence which underpins a coaching relationship (Whitmore, 2009). Clients who need to form effective relationships and accept differing points of view in the workplace may also need help developing empathy (Hind et al., 2009). A complex and dynamic field of research backs up Koopman and Hakemulder's "tentative support" (2015) for the positive effects of fiction upon empathy.

More generally, literature "promotes imaginative over rational understanding and ... the strength of the imagination is its ability to think between disciplines and to conceive of wholes not just parts" (Oswald, 2019, p541). Three of the English Romantics wrote widely on imagination. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats believed, crucially, that imagination is not a simile for fancy, or fantasy (Warnock, 1976), that it "stands in some essential relation to truth and reality" (Bowra, 1950, p. 5) whilst being beyond the cold grip of "empiricist thought" (Moore and Strachan, 2010, p. 3). These characteristics of the Romantic imagination led me to make their writings the focus of my research.

How to research the Romantic imagination

My methodology reflected several concerns. I wanted to write a good dissertation. I wanted to heed Alvesson and Gabriel (2013). I had a hunch that the ways the Romantics write about imagination could inform coaching practice, but I couldn't be sure. I needed first to conceptualise the phenomenon and then try to develop some applicable, if not generalisable, guidance for coaches.

The "how" in my question pointed to a pragmatic approach. There is no single reading of a text, rather meaning is generated by the writer and the reader (Bryman, 2016). These considerations place the question in an interpretivist paradigm.

English Romanticism was an early 19th century Artistic movement. It began "as a consequence of [the French Revolution's] failure" (Brown, 2001, p. 11) which saw the Revolution's ideals descend into tyranny (Schama, 1989). The Romantics' interest in imagination arose from their concern that humanity was losing an essential part of what it is to be human. Disillusioned by the Revolution's failure, "disciplined by the succeeding storms and sobered by increase of years" (Coleridge and Jackson, 1985, p. 251) writers sought ways for the "unintelligible" (Wordsworth, 1959, p. 201) to exist alongside the "cold philosophy" (Keats and Barnard, 1988, p. 431) which had kept the guillotine so busy.

My interest in researching the place of imagination in coaching came from a growing awareness that we live, again, in an age "[w]hen Reason seem[s] most to assert her rights" (Wordsworth, 1979, p. 396). Science and technology subjects dominate the UK curriculum, and education funding (e.g. Augar et al, 2019). Aggressive data harvesting speaks of a culture which views our behaviour as predictable, perhaps programmable. This is the world in which our coaching clients live. It is perhaps not a coincidence that a world increasingly reliant on binary code is becoming a more binary world. Failure to accept nuance in the world is destroying empathy at a personal level, and already fragile political consensus at a societal level (Bragg, 2019; Hochschild, 2018; Haidt, 2013; Peijnenburg, 2006).

This societal dimension required a method which went beyond mere hermeneutic examination of the texts. Simply deciphering the Romantics would be insufficient. I needed to lift my eyes from the page and see how their ideas might live in our concrete world. At the suggestion of my tutors, I explored Discourse Analysis as this appeared suitable for a problem with both a personal and social dimension.

Discourse analysis is often concerned with structures of power (Wodak and Meyer, 2009; Widdowson, 2007). The phrase "dare to dream" comes to mind. To dare is to do something courageous, transgressive even, which stands out from the norms of expected, acceptable behaviours. Children "dare" each other to take risks; parents admonish, "Don't you dare!" In describing dreaming (a synonym here for imagining a state of affairs other than the status quo) as an act of daring the phrase can send an implicit message that it might be better not to. Thus power, in the form of Reason, tends to restrict imagination.

Whilst discourse analysis developed as a tool to examine our contemporary world it can also be applied to written language from the past (Brinton, 2018; Widdowson, 2007). There are two strands of discourse in the texts; between the Romantics and the (political and poetic) context in which they wrote; and between the Romantics and their readers. My work aimed to inform thinking about the here and now, hence my focus was on the discourse between author and reader.

I adapted the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA, Reisigl and Wodak, 2009) to interrogate my chosen texts for data which address the research question. Resigl and Wodak place DHA in the context of social justice and political campaigning. My ambitions were not on that scale, although my research question stems in part from concerns about social and power structures which are based on data and Reason. I believe that my approach to the research would have been similar had I not adopted DHA and I might have found myself using something which looked like DHA without ever having been aware of it as a term.

Alongside their poems, I read Keats' letters (Keats, Gittings and Mee, 2002), Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (Owen and Smyser, 1974/2008) and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (Coleridge and Jackson, 1985). These different types of writing – the poetic, the informal, the quasi-manifesto and the theoretical – offered triangulation and variety as I pieced this puzzle together.

What is imagination?

I synthesised from the texts this working definition of the Romantic imagination susceptible to use in coaching:

I. The imagination is an innate element of our sense-making, it is as much a part of us as our liver or lungs or lymph nodes, but;

II. It has a metaphysical quality, and its operation is not fully explained by reference to physiology alone, it is "the combination of emotion and intellect" (Frye, 1964);

III. Whilst permanently with us, its nature is not fixed. Like an organ or a muscle its health, capacity and power can vary and can be influenced.

I discovered that the three most powerful influences were the poets' setting, action and mood. Where they were, and how they felt about where they were often a spurred imaginative effort. Unfamiliar surroundings, or a readiness to see the familiar in a new way, were happy hunting grounds. The most useful action was often a conscious decision to be ready for the uncertain, Keats describes this as "negative capability.. [accepting] uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and Reason" (2002, pp. 41-42). It is engagement of Claxton's (2005) "Wayward Mind". The poets stand on that tightrope between focussed concentration and blank receptivity which Csikszentmihalyi (1997) calls "Flow", and Keats "diligent indolence" (2002, p. 62). Often they make a choice to cede control, for the time being, to the unconscious and to trust in "easy (in the sense of being at ease, rather than facile) quest" (Keats, 1998, p. 63) above "irritable reaching" so that, in returning to consciousness, something will have become clearer. This creates moods of calm, patience and submission – what Wordsworth calls "wise passiveness" (1959, p. 194) – in which we the imagination "makes a toy of thought" (Coleridge, 1985, p. 87). In entering these moods they create the possibility of delight and new insights.

Implications for coaching

The following lines are as apt for our time as they were when Wordsworth wrote them in 1802.

> *The world is too much with us; late and soon,*
> *Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:*
> *[…]*
> *We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*
> *[…] we are out of tune*
> (Wordsworth, 1959, p. 435.)

Today's coaching clients, often overwhelmed by family pressures, and demanding bosses or customers, might well call out "The world is too much with me". "We are out of tune" sounds like an awareness of what, 200 years later, Mezirow would call a "disorienting dilemma" (1991). Whitmore (2009) describes how people reach a crisis because they have focussed too much on the quantitative, rather than the qualitative, aspect of personal growth. He is describing a wasting of powers, a giving away of the heart. Whether these clients and their coaches have anything to learn from a small group of long-dead men requires a little consideration.

Whilst not fabulously wealthy, Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth rarely had to struggle to make the rent or put food on the table. Equally few clients come to coaching wanting, as the Romantics did, to produce of bodies of literature which define their own time (Roe, 2005; Wu, 1995;) and remain relevant to an audience beyond poets 200 years later. And thanks to the Romantics, coaches and clients do not have to work up a theory of the imagination from first principles.

As coaches, if we are ready to start from where our clients are, we don't need to be masterful poets or champion imaginers, but we do need to understand how to engage our imagination and how to help our clients engage theirs. The Romantics give us something Ward considers central to this understanding:

> *a detailed and rigorous treatment of the cognitive processes from which novel ideas emerge and through which the creative potential of those ideas is recognized* (2001, p. 350).

Frye suggested "it is the *fundamental job of the imagination* to produce […] a vision of the society we want to live in" (1964, p. 140, my emphasis) . This suggests that the ambiguity of the Romantic imagination might just get us our hearts back, get us in tune, and get us paid (Sarasvathy, 2002). If we accept that my subjects are the go-to guys for the imagination (Bowra, 1950; Warnock, 1976), it would be at best capricious, at worst bloody-minded, to throw out the baby of their enduring relevance with the bathwater of their chromosomes, and their social and historical distance.

Discussion and conclusions

We see that enduring relevance in the following themes.

i) "Wise passiveness", "diligent indolence"

Heron (2001, p. 29) asserts that "[to] become aware in the exercise of choice and personal power..outgoing action [needs to be] balanced with attentive passivity. The person…notices what is there and creates what is different." This is Wordsworth's "wise passiveness", Keats' "diligent indolence". Heron's words come from his description of "The self-creating Person" whom he describes as having a level of personal awareness beyond the "unreflectively conventional"(ibid, p.29). He goes on to discuss how we can use imagination to change our perspective in a transpersonal (i.e. spiritual or metaphysical) approach to clients. Much of what he has to say chimes with Bachkirova's (2011) ideas on coaching the soul.

ii) "Negative capability"

For Rowan (2014, p.152) the transpersonal approach "adopts a sceptical attitude to the concepts of goals and tasks". This echoes negative capability with its readiness to embrace not knowing. It could equally apply to existentialist coaching with its inherent scepticism about being defined by one's situation and its insistence on choice (Spinelli, 2014; Van Deurzen and Hanaway, 2012). Our imagination enables us to broaden our range of choices. A further possible application of negative capability shows up in Passmore and Marianetti's (2007) discussion of mindfulness and its capacity to reduce the levels of the stress hormone cortisol. If we substitute "irritable reaching after fact and Reason" for stress, then submitting to "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" begins to sound like mindfulness. Passmore and Marianetti go on to suggest that mindfulness will help the coach maintain focus and remain emotionally detached. Coaches who wish to become more mindful might therefore choose to emulate the Romantics and give themselves conscious, purposeful and sufficient time away from the coal face, whether in nature, or in an art gallery or library.

iii) Avoiding "Palpable designs", "suspension of disbelief"

My own coaching work is person-centred and therefore client-led (Joseph, 2014). Perhaps inevitably this leads me to consider how what the Romantics show us can be of use to clients, and then work back from the client to consider what it is that a coach needs to do help the client to access what is useful. Keats says "we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us", that tells us what to think, and "if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket" (2002, p. 58). The image of the poetry (by extension the poet) sulking at a reader's alternative reading is an arresting one for a coach. Hardingham could be glossing Keats when she says "No other human being has the right to impose his way of seeing the world on another, nor to deny the sense [the other's world view] has to the person who holds it." (2004, p. 29) Similarly Whitmore insists that "[a] coach pulls out of the coachee his own inner knowing rather than pushing onto him what he should do"(2009, p. 209). Keats is clearly not the father of person-centred coaching. It is instructive however that Carl Rogers "spent a lot of time reading and engaging in imaginative activity and reflection"(Corey, 2017, p. 164) before developing the Person-Centred approach which eschews "direct intervention" (ibid, p. 165) or, indeed, palpable designs. Whatever the benefits of imagination we, as coaches, need to avoid imagining outcomes for our clients and, however subconsciously, imposing these upon them. Rather we need to use it to help us attend to the client's needs, and if becoming more imaginative is one such need, to help them do so.

Tolerance of ambiguity, or "be[ing] prepared for different outcomes" (Whitmore, 2009, p. 209) is crucial for coaches (Peltier, 2010) if we are to avoid having palpable designs on our clients. The link between ambiguity and the imagination is clear to Coleridge: "Imagination [...] reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (1985, p. 319). In a rare empirical study, which reinforces Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) and Dyer et al's (2009) more anecdotal work, Zanasni et al (2008), found some links between tolerance for ambiguity and creativity. They insist that tolerance for ambiguity "empowers the intrinsically motivated exploration of novel, unusual or complex stimuli" (p.62). This sounds like the work of the imagination which Coleridge describes as "Full many a thought uncalled and undetained/And many idle flitting phantasies"(*The Eolian Harp*, 1985, p. 28, ll.39-40). So helping clients to work with their tolerance of ambiguity might address difficulties they have in engaging their imagination. This would involve understanding why they find ambiguity troubling and offering a supportive environment for them to play with ambiguity.

One way to do this is to withhold - initially at least - our own judgement. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes how he desired his poetry to contain "a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination [a] willing suspension of disbelief for the moment"(1985, p. 314), in other words that his readers would ignore the fiction of his creations and believe them to be, in some sense, truthful. Suspending our disbelief, at the moment of their emergence, in the viability or desirability of our clients' suggestion will help them to range freely over options, before we help them to test those options for reasonableness, operability and "a semblance of truth".

iv) "an unaccustomed train of words and images"

Reading initiates imagination as "a dance between thoughts and feelings [which] can enhance self-understanding and challenge us to live more fully as human beings" (Eva-Wood, 2008, p. 575) and lead to "moments of recognition or acknowledgement that signal change" (Miall and Kuiken, 2002, p.236). This indicates that heeding Keats and "read[ing] a certain page of full Poesy" might be more than just "delicious diligent Indolence!" (2002, p. 62). It seems a sure-fire way to develop imagination. We might share the activity with our clients, or encourage them in their own discovery of fiction.

What, and how, we choose to read is important. Wordsworth describes poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (1959, p. 248). Coleridge's gloss on Wordsworth is helpful, he describes a "pleasurable confusion of thought [aroused by] an unaccustomed train of words and images"(1985, p. 333). Greene (2000) echoes Frye's (1964) point that we can understand others by attending to the art they create. Imagination is crucial for empathy (Peijnenburg, 2006; Frank, 1978) which is crucial for coaching (Tschennen-Moran, 2014; Peltier, 2010). Choosing to engage deeply with an "unaccustomed train of words and images" from other cultures, genders and socio-economic groups will awaken our imagination and help us empathise with those who don't look and love and live like us. This may find application in the coaching of diverse teams.

I would suggest that coaches use these techniques to work on themselves before considering which might be appropriate for use with clients. My research journey began with a hunch that literature had some answers about the human condition, and a personal need to push at the boundaries I felt coaching research had drawn around itself. In showing how coaches can learn from the Romantics, I have proved my hunch and moved the boundaries a little. My hope is that the findings from my research justify the approach I took, respond to Alvesson and Gabriel's call and encourage others to look beyond generally accepted sources of insight.

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