

Book Review

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Transformative Coaching: A Learning Theory for Practice

by Susan Askew and Eileen Carnell (2011), London: Institute of Education.

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Are *you* willing to reflect on your own practice? Do you take a strong interest in your coachees' learning? In sum, are you a *purposeful reader*? If so, this book may be for you. Askew and Carnell certainly hope so. They have set out to write a concise book that provokes fresh thinking for coaches, based on their own previously published work, and their experience of running the coaching service at the London-based Institute of Education.

The overall message is encouragement for coaches to find ways of helping people to learn, using a non-hierarchical collaborative relationship. The authors define a coach as a 'facilitator of learning', and think that the word 'coach' does not fully capture what they are driving at. Other terms include calling coaching sessions 'meetings', and goals 'actions for change'. This attention to terminology and clarity of argument is a very positive feature of the book, with discussion ranging from very detailed coaching behaviours through to abstract conceptual analysis.

The book favours a learner-centred, rather than goal-centred approach to coaching. Askew and Carnell define learning as 'change – to behaviour or change to thinking, or our perception of something'. Much of the argument draws upon Mezirow's theory of transformational learning, encouraging critical reflection on a person's underlying beliefs and assumptions. This constitutes 'transformative coaching, and has a large overlap with what many would term 'developmental coaching'. The authors join with Mezirow in arguing that our understanding of transformational learning is under-theorised.

Following introduction and scene-setting, there is a useful conceptual chapter that pulls together the work of several theorists and clearly marks out the territory for learning. Building on their previous book on the subject published in 1998, the authors advocate attending to learning before goal-setting. Goals and actions are based on learning insights rather than the other way around. Indeed, their coaching model allocates almost all available time to exploration, learning and meta-learning, with only a few minutes on action in each session. They argue that one can always reflect on action at a later session. A primary aim for the coach is to judge at what level to work with the coachee, help the learner maximise their learning, and also to notice and improve how they learn (meta-learning).

The book acknowledges that transformational learning is valuable, complex and often difficult. One chapter is dedicated to explaining how transformational learning can imply a change in a person's identity. The book makes some progress in this area, and offers some pointers for coaches working with individuals who encounter strong emotions as part of the process. That said, it would have been helpful for the authors to signal the pitfalls, downsides and emotional upset that transformational learning often involves. There could be earlier and more substantive acknowledgment of the potentially negative outcomes of questioning one's fundamental beliefs and perspectives.

A chapter on coach development bases some of its argument on the experience at the Institute of Education. It is an interesting case study on what happened when academics and administrative staff volunteered to become coaches and/or be coached. Details are given of intensive discussions and meetings, with a high ratio of supervision hours to practice hours. This led to a supportive, cohesive

learning community group, although one wonders how many organisations might find the time and resources to fund such an activity.

The authors are clear about their values and assumptions and make a good case for readers to re-examine their own. One that caught my eye was what value we each place on demonstrating status and competence by achieving things. Perhaps this reflects what I pay attention to in my own inner dialogue. The book questions the value of an achievement orientation. By implication, it invites coaches and organisations to question their own assumption in this area. This might be rather threatening in some task-based work cultures.

One chapter supports organisations in adopting the learner-centred principles as a way of building a learning organisation. The book states that the full potential of a learning organisation can only be realised if the principles of transformative coaching are embraced by all its members. Askew and Carnell note that coaching is not neutral – it is more about liberating the individual than following organisational goals per se. However, they support the idea of increasing the congruence between individual learning and organisation learning. Whilst some of the barriers to such a vision are acknowledged, this argument does seem rather light on the realities of such a project. It is almost as if they see coaching as a panacea. Whilst there are few references to established literature on executive coaching, organisational change etc, the authors do suggest that this approach may suit educational and social organisations more than totally efficiency-oriented businesses.

Overall, the book has much to say about the value of coaching being learner-centred. It does a good job of combining theory with some rich detailed transcripts of coaching sessions to illustrate the argument and provide guidance for practice. One limitation is that the book is based on the authors' professional experience of practice, and on their involvement in the coaching service scheme in a single organisation. Evidence from 20 interviews with scheme participants has been published elsewhere (see Hargreaves, 2010). Askew and Carnell note that their case is unusual. For example, 80% of the coaches and 90% of the coachees were women. The *primary* purpose of the coaching service was not coaching per se (italics in original), and there was some non-response bias in Hargreaves (2010). Though I largely welcome their contribution, ideally I would have liked to hear more evidence for their argument, and how it might apply across a wider range of people and organisational types.

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References

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