

Coaching as dialogue: Creating spaces for (mis)understandings

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Abstract

This paper considers dialogue as the central motif of coaching. Taking a social constructionist perspective it proposes that dialogue is the flow of meaning between human beings as they interact. Dialogue is explored from the stance of different forms of conversational practice. It is contrasted with the practice of monologue which is “talking at” or “talking about” rather than “talking with”. This paper compares the practices of a coach-expert who specialises in “aboutness” talk with a coach-custodian who specialises in “within-ness” talk. The essential difference is that the coach-expert role focuses on the situation/world and a coach-custodian role focuses on coachees (as meaning-makers of their own situation/experience). By employing within-ness talk, a coach maintains the focus on the coachee and his/her situation as well as demonstrating a strength-based philosophy, that is, the philosophy that a coachee has the capacity to find their own solutions.

Key Words: dialogue, social constructionism, meaning, coach-expert, coach-custodian.

Introduction

Organisational coaching, broadly, assists people to find agency and empowerment within the micro-politics of complex organisational environments, through a structured series of learning dialogues. There are other recent articles that connect dialogue with coaching (Goldsmith, M & Lyons, L, 2007, Stelter R, 2007; Cilliers F, 2005). This paper is aimed at understanding this central motif of coaching more fully through a philosophical stance of social constructionism.

While coaching is a million dollar industry, it is also a relatively new one and many contributions to the field concern themselves with distinguishing coaching from its allied professions of therapy (Price 2009, Clutterbuck 2009), the Human Potential Movement (Spence 2007) and from other organisational learning interventions such as consulting, mentoring and facilitation (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger 2007). Rather than emphasising difference, this article turns to finding similarity or common ground. From a social constructionist stance, dialogue is the process through which people constitute who they are and therefore how they act in terms of the situations they face (see endnotes). From this perspective therefore, coaching is a meaning-making activity - a facilitated conversation in the service of a coachee's self-explorations. The purpose of the dialogue is to explore the ways that the coachee constructs meaning about any given situation. As this exploration occurs, meaning is re-authored and solutions to dilemmas or problems emerge. Following Wittgenstein's advice to drop our theories about what is going on

(Harre & Stearns 1995) and to look at what [coaches] are doing in the fullness of their situations, what is seen is that the central motif of coaching is a dialogue.

Dialogue is central to human social life and through it we connect and build the social world. But, although dialogue is omnipresent it is rarely examined and explored. Yet, coaches make their living (and build their professional competence and identity) around this very commonplace activity. Freud once famously reflected, “We do analysis for two reasons, to understand the unconscious and to make a living” (Jacoby 1975:124). The proposal here is (with apologies to Freud) that perhaps coaches do what they do to make a living, and to understand dialogue.

This paper turns to a philosophical view called social constructionism¹ (Shotter 2006, 1993a, 1993b; Gergen, 1999; Burr 1995). From a social constructionist perspective, dialogue is the “flow of events that occur in the communicative interaction between human beings” (Shotter, 1993:7). It is “joint action” (*ibid*) because any interactions cannot be attributed to one or the other person; they are entirely interdependent. In fact, we cannot not respond. When a second person responds to the activities of a first person, then how the second person reacts cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity. Our responses are always partly 'shaped' by the first person's actions (which are always also a response). (Shotter, 1993a&b).

Introducing Dialogue

Two people are sitting in chairs, facing each other. Their bodies seem relaxed but animated. The atmosphere in the room is alive with expectation and anticipation. These two beings seem to know each other, yet they have only met twice before. There is a lively interchange of words going on, two bodies leaning in towards each other and then moving away. Sometimes there is fidgeting, sometimes stillness, as though there is some invisible choreographer guiding a dance. At times the words flow quickly in a lively interplay of utterances, the cadences rising and falling. There is smiling, even laughter at times; at others a frown of discomfort or concentration. Sometimes the air is filled with the exchange of words, then silence, sometimes tense and sometimes thoughtful. Occasionally, one person pauses, a light-bulb moment on their face as though a sudden shift, change, new thought has occurred. What is evident is that this coaching interaction is an intimate space where an easy flow of meaning and genuine connection exists. This exchange is meaningful, valued, and important.

The word “dialogue” emerged in the 13th century from the Greek dialogos, or dialegesthai (the verb) – *dia* “across, movement” and *legein* “to speak”¹ which evokes the notion of dialogue as a dynamic flow of words and meanings between people². For the early Greeks (and particularly Socrates) it was through dialogue that virtue and knowledge were produced. Socrates

¹ The ending indicates a “middle voice”, which was neither active (“she talked to him”) nor passive, (“he was talked at”). This is the middle infinitive, (“talking occurred”). It indicates the change of focus from the people in the dialogue to the “middle space” which emerges as we interact. Shotter and others consider that this is a unique space, a synergy (chemistry) which is more than each person.

² The Greeks did not differentiate conversation from dialogue

believed that the essential quality of human beings was their ability to question. He was nicknamed a “gadfly” because he stung people awake by questioning their often preciously held assumptions. Gentler forms of dialogue and conversation emerged later in the great salons of Europe (Zeldin1995). Dialogue became an art form; a gentle dance between supporting and challenging someone in order to create an atmosphere of connection and exuberant learning.

Dialogue may seem like a simple and uncomplicated activity because it is so taken for granted. However, as we are always responding to something - often beyond our consciousness, dialogue is actually very complex. In any dialogue there is a intermingling of life histories, aspirations and dreams, personal psychologies, organisational systems and roles, theories-in-action, skills and capabilities. The coachee brings with them their challenges and successes as well as a personal history, their role, their organisational culture, their team members, and their personal, social, family and cultural heritage. Then there is the coach and the entirety of factors all over again. This complexity is both dialogue’s fascination and its strength because it is the depth of this complexity that produces the conditions for the possibility of something “new” and different to emerge.

We might think of it as making vegetable soup. We have all tasted soup and know what it is like! Some of us want to just eat it, others want to reproduce it. Along the way most of us probably broadly understand how to make a reasonable soup; some of us even experiment with recipes, stamp our personality on them and create our own. We mix lots of ingredients in different proportions and in different ways. However the final result – the soup – is more than any singular ingredient and actually a different entity. Furthermore, even when we follow the same recipe, each outcome is different. We cannot fully control the mix, the quality of the ingredients, the container, the temperature and (especially!) the chef and/or the diners ‘taste.

This metaphor can be applied to the coaching dialogue. We engage in dialogues every day. Some we enjoy more than others. We develop an approach to coaching and habits for conducting coaching dialogues. Yet, like the soup, we cannot entirely control a dialogue. With so many contributing variables, a conversation is unrepeatable, a unique and sometimes chaotic event that generates something often surprising to all involved.

In the face of this uniqueness and uncertainty the coach’s theoretical and philosophical stance becomes important. If a coach is clear about their intention for the dialogue then any complexity or difficulty that occurs will be managed from this space of intention. In other words there is an important self-referential aspect of coaching; that means a coach who constantly questions themselves about the purpose of the coaching dialogue, whether their process is fits their intention and whether they are walking the talk that they espouse about their coaching practice. This is not only a matter of discernment and self discipline but also about being reflexively aware of the social norms and cultural habits also shaping the relational space.

Monologues and dialogues

Dialogue is in contrast to a monologue (Tannen, D 1999; Bahktin, M, 1984). Before Socrates, monologue (or talk as a one-way process where a wise, (usually) man talked, and

everyone else listened) prevailed. This practice of monologue still exists today in schools and lecture halls, expert consultations, political speeches, charismatic addresses, and everyday meetings. As a cultural habit, monologue is usually not even noticed. Imagine a management meeting:

People are at a meeting talking about a shared issue. A witness view shows a peculiar interactive practice going on. One after another people throw their opinion into the group space. The opinions arrive in quick succession. One person speaks, tossing their opinion on the table, nobody acknowledges it and then another throws their opinion, then the next, and the next. There is minimal or no real response to what was said previously except in terms of the next opinion being perhaps implicitly “for” or “against”. The practice is a series of monologues but nobody notices. Finally the senior manager looks at her/his watch, pronounces his/her final word for agreement (or more commonly, compliance) and the meeting finishes.

This is “talking at” rather than “talking with”, each contribution challenging the last for its place in the sun preceded by an implicit “yes, but”. With no response there is no dialogue and, more significantly, with no response people feel unacknowledged and, often, invisible.

It is the predominance of serial monologues in contemporary life³ that make coaching so significant, especially in organisations. Five-second sound bites, public figures with media training taught to keep “on message” rather than respond, tweeting, “dot point conversations” (“just summarise it in a couple of dot points”), are all versions of monologue. We speak *at* each other rather than *with* each other, our interactions reduced to mini-monologues that are blind and deaf to the human being on the other side waiting to be acknowledged. From a social constructionist perspective this constructs the other (often unintentionally) as not present, invisible and of no value.

The coaching dialogue should be an exception to these practices. There are several important theoretical and philosophical underpinning to coaching practice that shape it as an exception.; that it is espoused to be reciprocal, strength oriented⁴, in the service of the coachee, supportive and dynamic enough to produce ‘Aha’ moments or new learning. When these are present a coach is *in* the conversation as well as *monitoring* the conversation. The conduct of the encounter fits the intentions and purpose. In other words learning the technique and skill of coaching is not enough. All skills are shaped by a worldview or perspective. If we are not aware of this, then the skill of coaching becomes rather like the serial monologues; blind and deaf to our coachees’ potential, their expertise and our purpose and role as a coach.

How this shows up in the coaching dialogue

Imagine we are witnessing a coaching conversation again.

³ Deborah Tannen cites that in one USA study couples living together conversed for not more than half an hour weekly and with their children for five minutes weekly.

⁴ A strength based approach means that the coach is practicing with the belief that the coachee can come to their own solutions. The coach’s role therefore is to facilitate this.

The coachee who is in a significant senior management role has just told a lengthy story about a problem he is having with somebody in the workplace who is putting the organisation at risk with their behaviours. The coach listens, asking many questions and clarifying what she heard, trying to understand the context, the content, why the person is behaving the way they are and why this puts the organisation at risk. She makes comprehensive notes. Once she believes that she understands she says "I think that this is about..." (and gives her opinion about what she has heard). "I think that this is a case of..." (she gives her assessment) "Have you tried...? (then provides a suggestion). The coachee listens, nods, then responds, prefacing his reply with "yes, but..." The whole interaction is repeated. The coach persists, carefully emphasising the fact that on the basis of what she has heard, there are few alternatives open to the coachee. Another "yes, but" comes back and the process is repeated once again - several times.

Finally the coach says, "Well, what do you think you can do?" sounding perhaps mildly exasperated. "I'm not sure..." the coachee replies, "That's why I am asking you." So the coach says again, more fully this time, "My professional opinion is that this person is behaving in this way because (provides a diagnosis/explanation), and in you not acting you could be seen as... (another assessment), therefore I really think that you should... (advice is provided)" The coachee does not speak, and then looks away. "Perhaps you're right...I don't really have the expertise in this area..." Silence again. Then the coach breaks the silence, "So what do you think about trying that?" The coachee looks doubtful and in a reluctant tone, says, "I suppose I could". "Good", says the coach, "then let's identify exactly what you are going to do".

We then travel to the next room. Another one-to-one coaching session is in progress.

This coachee too is very senior in her organisation. She also has a story about a troublesome relationship at work. The coach listens until the coachee has finished her story. He does not ask many clarifying questions. He nods in empathy and asks, "So, after hearing yourself tell me about this situation, what are you thinking now?" The coachee looks surprised, then says, "That's interesting because when I heard myself talking just now, I found myself thinking to myself, 'Why is this such a big issue?' After all, I have so many other things more pressing on my plate... I could just..." (she identifies a way forward then laughs), "It's such a novel idea. I wonder why I haven't thought of it until now?" Then her voice tapers off, and she stops speaking, looking pensive. The coach waits. After a long silence, he says quietly but firmly, "and...why haven't you, do you think?" The coachee laughs. "There is no reason, except ...I am not sure if I ... (she offers the reason why she has not done it). Another silence. The coachee looks down, and then sighs, remaining silent. She looks towards the coach. There is frisson in the air. The coach remains silent, waiting. After a while, he smiles and says, "What are you thinking now?" The coachee smiles wanly. "I was thinking about a similar situation a long time ago...", she says, "and it's not one I want to go into here". She looks determined as though she is sure that the coach will ask questions. The tension in the air increases. The coach nods. "Without telling me what it is, in what ways is this thing from the past affecting the current situation?" She looks surprised at the question. "That's a good question", she says. "Actually, I've not made the connection before. When I think about it more I realise that now I'm a very different person. The coach strengthens her idea about being a different person. "So in the light of this difference and who you are now, what do you think about the way forward you identified earlier?" The coachee

replies she doesn't know...and then looks at the coach and asks, "What would you suggest I do?" The coach smiles and looks mischievous. "What do you think I would suggest?" he replies. She laughs. "I'm serious", he says, "What suggestion do you think I would have?" The coachee looks at him, long and hard. "I think you would say that the idea I had right at the beginning of our session would be a good way forward!" The coach gently says, "And now?" The coachee thinks, and then says firmly, "It's what I am going to do". The coach notes this as a confirmation of a preferred choice.

He thinks of the complexity of her role, the past history and their present contexts. He evokes some of these elements to help her move forward on the issue, "What would others say", "Is this helpful to you?" "What would be the effect of this action?", "How will you get support?", "How can I support you?" He stays firm about championing this preferred pathway even when she falters a little in her resolve, holding and heralding the "new" – the solution that the coachee identified - with ruthless compassion. He continues asking questions about all aspects of her option and its consequences, "thickening its descriptions" (Geertz 1983) until the coachee herself feels/expresses confidence about her actions. Plans are made and the coachee writes down her actions. The coach finishes the session by asking, "What has been your major take-away from this session?", knowing that often what he thinks is a major learning is often different for the coachee.

These two scenarios illustrate coaching dialogues shaped by two different philosophical worldviews; the first conversation is the expression of a 'realist' philosophy and the second a 'social constructionist' philosophy. In the first scenario the result is a coach adopting the role of "coach-expert", a role of "coach-custodian". The essential difference is that the coach-expert focuses on the situation/world (the "realist" philosophical position), while the coach-custodian focuses on the coachee as meaning-maker of the situation/world (the social constructionist perspective). In the first the object of the inquiry is the situation, in the second the object of inquiry is the coachee's meaning about the situation.

The proposition is that the (often implicit) philosophical positioning of a practitioner will determine their conversation behaviours (see endnotes). In the first scenario the coach is acting from a realist view in a role of "coach-expert". The realist assumption is that there is a "real" problem out there (existing separately to a person's construction of it) and therefore the coach's role is to investigate the problem from a rational, objective stance to find the source (and therefore the remedy) that will alleviate and solve the coachee's problem. From the beginning when the issue is tabled, the coach is focused on the content of the story, believing that the more she understands the information, the better will be her rational, diagnostic/problem-solving capabilities. The coach asks questions to elicit information from the coachee in order to assist her expert understanding of the problem. The coachee is implicitly shaped as less knowing and a "problem" in need of remediation and the coach-expert as the authority. This is actually the basis of everyday professional practice (we all like to be considered subject matter or technical experts) and organisational life. But, it is unconsciously perpetuated through habit rather than intention and taken further than the role requires. It does, however have profound consequences because it implicitly discounts the capability and expertise of the other.

Once the coach-expert has interviewed her coachee enough to “understand” what is going on, she injects her expert opinion and diagnosis into the conversation through suggestions and advice giving. The focus is on providing meaning TO the coachee, rather than making meaning WITH the coachee. The coach-expert draws “from outside”, beyond the “here and now” of the engagement and imposes a “foreign body” into it. Yet most coaches promote a coaching as a collaborative space. But is this an example of collaboration? From a social constructionist philosophy it is a violation of trust because it implies that the coachee is a problem needing help rather than an equal participant in a collaborative space.

Resistance to this [imposition] is signaled in the “yes, but...” reply, which one could imagine, if one thinks about the prevalence of advice giving is an [other] attempt by the coachee to be heard and acknowledged. The “yes, but” is perhaps implicitly a protest and a plea for a return to equality, to a re-connection with the coachee’s own experience and expertise.

Ironically, most “good” advice falls on barren ground. We share a sea of language and cultural practices that mean that 90% of advice just recycles the “already said”. Worse still in imposing the “already said”, we imply that “we know better”, that the coachee falls short, is lacking and/or needs “fixing”. Diagnosis and advice are assessments that do not emerge from mutuality. Advice giving closes the dialogue space. This is because with advice, the exchange becomes “about-ness talk”. In “about-ness talk” the focus is no longer “present” in the interchange (Shotter 2006). There is an interloper – something external being referred to - and the talk becomes about this interloper.

It has to be said that this view about giving advice may not be accepted by many coaches. However if coaching as an industry espouses coaching as collaborative and that our coachees are capable people who can solve their own problems then we need to walk the talk of this (or in this case talk the talk!). This is not to say advice giving suggestions and direction are wrong. It means that these practices should be minimized or even absent from coaching practice. Moreover coaching is not relevant for every situation or context. The role of subject matter expert, technical expert, teacher, mentor and consultant are also important roles in our organisations. There are many situations (including emergency situations) that require a different role (and therefore conversational practices).

In our increasingly rational-scientific culture there is always some powerful “outsider knowledge” ready to capture and control local embodied experience and meaning. In many contexts this knowledge is appropriate and useful. In the coaching dialogue the problem with externally imposed frameworks is that they are often accompanied by cultural power that silences other (often less scientifically valid) ways of knowing (Armstrong 1999, Falzon 1999). When this happens, the flow of events between coach and coachee is obstructed. More significantly (as illustrated in our scenario), when our coachee’s experience is negated, he gives up, overpowered by the coach-expert’s superior role and status.

The purpose of the coaching dialogue is to generate new meanings around the dilemma or anomaly that is brought to the session. In a dialogue *with* the coachee, questions are introduced that encourage the development of new meaning around the coachee’s experience. Once new meaning is generated, new pathways for action can be identified.

Furthermore change is more likely to be sustained because new meanings are generated by the coachee. The coaching dialogue therefore should be as free as possible from the coach imposing “outsider” knowledge. This minimisation of “about-ness talk” signals the move to a coach-custodial role⁵ and a social constructionist stance. The focus here is on the exchange itself. Whatever is offered by the coachee has meaning for the dialogic space, each thread of the experience woven tightly and closely into the one before. The coach and coachee talk with each other, exploring the exchange itself. There is sensibility present about the dance of nuances, embodied expression, movement and engaged utterances being the fertile material to something new to emerge.

Furthermore, implicitly the interchange exhibits a moral stance, the trust that each person is being respected by the other as an equal, legitimate, fully capable and powerful meaning-maker. In our second scenario, an example of this occurred when the coachee was asked to reflect on listening to herself telling her story. The question that the coach asked was not about the content of the story but about the coachee’s thoughts as she related the content of the story. The inner expertise of the coachee was being accessed and appeared very tentatively as a “way forward”, generated by this question. The work of the coach-custodian was to hear this “solution”, note it, hold on to it with patience, waiting for it to appear (or not) again, trusting that by maintaining dialogue any ‘news of difference’ (Bateson, G 1979) will appear.

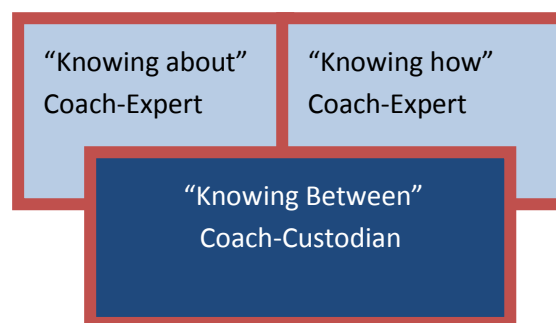
Trusting the dialogue to do its work can mean at times feeling apprehensive about the turbulence and discomfort that is always possible in an open, undirected and unfettered space. It can also mean a charged atmosphere of anticipation and expectation. In our scenario, discomfort appeared with the self-realisation of a stumbling block. Sometimes in the face of discomfort a coach can resort to the coach- expert role and inject advice or platitudes. In the second scenario the coach held the space with silence. The challenge increased but was supported by the trust that develops between people when open and non-judgmental questions are asked. Trust permits relational risk taking (Armstrong 2010) and the coach, while respecting the coachee’s wishes not to tell the old story, asks another reflexive question to access its meaning in the current situation. There is no intrusion or importation of a “foreign body” of knowledge or method. Even when advice is requested the coach respectfully and playfully refuses the invitation, asking a question instead, and therefore holding the space for coachee-centered learning to occur. The coach is patient, waiting for the arrival of a more stable new organisation of meaning and experience in terms of a way forward. He then, as coach-custodian, returns to the early solution generated by the coachee to inquire whether it is still relevant and when it is moves to strengthen it, giving it reality through planning and action.

All of this demonstrates reflexive awareness (or metacognition) defined as a person reflecting on her/his own role as he/she interacts. This is central to the coach-custodian role. It was present in the second scenario when the coachee asked for advice. Rather than succumb to giving advice, the coach acted reflexively. He most probably felt the temptation because advice giving is the habitual practice of in our culture. He resisted this and maintained the role and mindset of the coach-custodian.

⁵ With awareness that anything written here is another external framework!

His actions in the face of this temptation speak to another aspect of the social constructionist perspective on dialogue; the space or gap between people is never empty. Whenever people come together in conversation there are always invisible threads of prevalent culture, personal history and psychology, organisational roles and culture, disciplinary knowledge, emotions and memories inhabiting the space as well. These different threads move in and out of the flow of events in any exchange. In the first scenario they invaded the dialogue and re-shaped it from a collaborative enterprise to a consultation. In the second scenario, stories from the coachee's past were present and could have re-shaped the coaching dialogue into counseling or therapy. The coach upheld the integrity of the service he was providing (not therapy/consulting) and therefore the ethics of his relationship with the organisation (who was paying for the service). In order to maintain the dialogue as a coaching dialogue he asked how the past story was influencing and showing up in the present scenario; an example of re-positioning himself as custodian-coach (not coach-expert). Shotter (2006, 1993b) calls this relational-responsiveness. *A "good" conversation is dynamic and opinions and feelings are woven across the "gap" between us, bridging it through responses that are "crafted" and "tailored" to that particular instance...* (p. 53).

Contrasting the Coach-expert and Coach-Custodian



The difference between the coach-expert and coach-custodian roles is that the coach-expert is curious about the situation/world and the coach-custodian is curious about the person (as meaning-maker of their own experience). The coach-expert believes that their credibility as a coach depends on their "*knowledge about*" (their expert knowledge of some field, e.g., senior management, leadership, psychology, law, education, computing), or their "*knowledge how*" e.g. of some "correct" method or process. The coach-custodian on the other hand highlights their expertise as "*knowledge between*", their embodied sensibility to safeguard the dialogue space in order for bridging, connection and coachee-centered learning to be generated. This does not mean that the coach-custodian rejects the other forms of knowledge. It means that in the coaching dialogue their primary purpose and expertise lies in their capacity to be present, reflexive and maintain the space of dialogue so that the conditions are optimal for coachee learning and embedded action.

Tips for the Coach-Custodian

Why ask (not tell?)

- People are experts in their own lives
- To establish rapport and trust quickly
- To engage and motivate
- To access inner expertise
- To empower leadership from within....
- To create connection and bonds
- To stabilise new meanings to embed and assist sustainability of learning

Therefore:

- Focus on the dialogue - not content (this is not either/or but a change of focus).
- Focus on how the coachee's is shaping their meaning about an event.
- It's not about you! (Ask yourself, who are you asking a question for?)
- It is about you (as well) – practice reflexivity and get your ego out of the way!
- You cannot not respond. Everything in the room is part of a response.
- Why is your judgment better? People are doing the best they can. If they knew differently they would do differently!
- Ask another question (rather than tell)
- Employ ruthless compassion and capture and honour cognitive shifts
- It's not what we know, but what we do with what we know! (capture what people will DO as a result of cognitive shifts)

Conclusion

When a person is invited into a dialogic space in most work/life settings, more often than not, the habitual practices are those of telling rather than inviting, judging rather than witnessing, advice-giving rather than empathetic inquiry. The expertise a coach brings to the space is recognizing this and acting counter culturally. The custodian-coach focuses less on knowing, managing, method and structure and more on presence, acting “into” opportunities (by asking questions and responding to invitations), as well acting as “against” barriers and restrictions (Shotter 1993b) that coachees offer us (by gently but persistently disputing these barriers).

Unfortunately expert knowledge, structure, and “correct” method which lead to advice giving are all too pervasive in corporate as well as private interactive environments. We feel more comfortable talking “about”, rather than being “with”, seemingly due to egoic needs (who doesn't love giving advice and being an expert!), and the cultural habit which is the foundation of professional practice. But in the context of coaching, the coach-experts' attempts to organise and manage the coaching experience through existing and external frameworks - usually the ones that have made most sense to their own lives is more about individual and professional power than

respect for the others abilities. (A process that Bill O’Hanlon in 1999 mischievously called “theory counter-transference”)

A successful coach can move across a wide range of different professional groups and contexts because coaching expertise is not “knowledge about” or actually even “knowledge of how” but “knowledge between”. A coach ought to “be” rather than just “do”. This requires reflexive awareness for the reason that any contribution we make emerges “out of” our own embodied reality and desires⁶ (Shotter 1993:47). With reflexive awareness the coach’s subjectivity (their personal stuff) becomes visible and tangible and part of the material to be worked with in the moment through reflecting and monitoring the quality of the inter-action. The mindset of the coach-custodian is one of trust in the process; that any encounters with turbulence, uncertainty and ambiguity will still generate outcomes for the dialogue (and therefore the coachee). Coaching therefore is a “practical theory”. Everything required for learning is already present. In Wittgenstein’s words, “*the function of 'practical theory'... is not so much "to hunt out new facts; it is rather... to understand something that is already in plain view..."* (Wittgenstein 1953, no.89 in Shotter 1997).

If the service the coach provides is to be custodian of the dialogic space, any organisation or management of the space (through advice, diagnosis, assessment) should be named as such and the invitation to respond to this imposition included in the shared space. Elsewhere the metaphor of the crucible has been used for this process (Armstrong et al 2004). The crucible, a container in which the ancient alchemists mixed their ingredients to produce “gold” is a metaphor for the coaching dialogue. The crucible was necessarily robust and able to contain heat or turbulence that might emerge in the blending of the ingredients. In coaching the crucible of dialogue is built through the moral obligations of coaching including building trust and respect in relationship. Trust is maintained and honoured when advice and opinions are included by the respectful acknowledgement and ownership of these as personal opinions/advice and by providing opportunities to reflect on the effects of the offering.

And finally, if the role of the coach is that of a custodian, this leaves an emerging profession with a basic epistemological conundrum around identity and practice. How do we bring coherence and rigour to coaching through theorising and expert knowledge (“knowledge about” coaching and “knowledge how” to coach) while at the same time minimise the potential of breaching (even violating) the world of the coachee through the use of theories, methods, prescriptions, authority and expertise, (all of which potentially override the coachee’s embodied meanings about their situation)? Social constructionist philosophy assists this conundrum because it is not about “either/or”, “this OR that”. What is described here is not about throwing the baby out with the bath water. We need both expert knowledge and theorising (e.g. this paper!). We also need to put these aside in the coaching encounter in the name of being in service of the coachee and their meaning making. And, in the spirit of the topic at hand, dialogue is the active process that bridges what is said and what is heard. Words and their meanings resonate and trigger different associations and new thoughts, which when spoken, blend and intermingle in the

⁶ It could be the desire to be a good coach, to help others, because of the conviction we know best, to prove our expertise amongst many other rationale.

space to build and grow new and different meanings. A dialogue is never complete so, may the dialogue continue!

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Appendix 1 - Social Constructionism – a taste.

1. Does language come before thought? Can we think without language?

People are born into a sea of language and cultural systems of meaning that pre-exist them. As a child learns to speak they join these cultural systems of meaning and language. They construct narratives that give meaning to their experience of the world and which gradually become habitual patterns of seeing the world or self-narratives. Through this process of developing and internalising language and cultural meaning systems, we grow a sense of self. Whatever our biology or genetic heritage is, it is always filtered through this process. We cannot think or act without the influence of language and social practices. It makes less sense therefore to think that people have an inner, original, essential self, which is then expressed, and more sense to say that in our communicative interactions with the world we create and re-create our selves (Wittgenstein 1953)¹. Coaching dialogues are a place where this creation can occur. A coach who realises that words and ‘meanings’ shift, modify and change will regard every coaching dialogue as an opportunity for transformation. And this highlights the problem of the traditional separation between talk and behaviour. Talk is action – a very powerful action that can change and transform people and organisations. The starting point for a coach in social constructionist terms is to question “everything” because the meaning does not exist ‘a priori’ to the dialogue, the space needs to be opened up for as many possibilities and options as possible because new meaning and therefore new actions result from the process of the dialogue itself.

2. Is it real, or does our thinking make it so?

Social constructionism would say that the reliance we place on reality, truth and “objective facts” is optimistic because we cannot know anything without filtering it through our existing personal and cultural meaning systems. This has implications for the stories our coachee’s recount as well as our attitude and approach to them. If there is more than one way to view events and experience then the aim of the coaching dialogue is not to “sort out” or “sort through” the “facts” in order to reach the “truth” – a process that then results in a diagnosis of the problem and then a solution (usually attached to an egoic attitude about the coach role as advisor and expert). From a social constructionist viewpoint the role of a coach is to maintain openness to the existence of multiple ways of seeing the world and through self-awareness to minimise the imposing of their experience and ego on to the topic at hand.

3. There is no I without you!

In social constructionism, “who” we are may have less to do with our biology and more to do with our communicative interaction with the world (Burr, V 1995) – something now validated by contemporary neuroscience research (Cozolino, L 2006; Siegel, D 2010). In looking at how the working brain processes, it is proposed that not only do we survive through our interaction, our brains change and adapt in response to our interactions, supporting the social constructionist view that there is less that is fixed and determined than we might think. Our inner processes then are shaped by the outer world as is the outer world shaped by our inner processes. There is no “I” without a “you”, no “us” without a “them”. “[W]ords cross the borders of our bodies in two directions, outside in and inside out... (Husvedt, 2010;55). By relating to others through dialogue we shape who we are - an identity and sense of self that constitutes our sense of belonging. Coaching as a dialogue is a place where people can re-author their stories, make new connections and new belongings, and then model for others the importance of conversation.

4. Is language and meaning fixed or shifting and fluid?

In terms of talk and conversation the conventional thought (when we think about it at all) is that when people talk they just transmit information from one to another and back again using language (passive tool) for reporting the experience of their inner thoughts. We assume and take for granted that we know what people mean when they talk (near enough) and that they will know what we mean (near enough) because we share the same tool – language – and same words have same meaning. If we talk long enough and find an expert to help us, the truth and the way forward will emerge. How often this taken for granted assumption lets us down! Yet it belongs to a particular worldview or philosophical perspective, “realism” that shapes most of our world. The belief is that there is one truth that can be discovered through the excavation of the facts and once discovered there will be a correct way forward.

5. So What?

Taking a social constructionist view of the coaching dialogue means a focus on process – listening, empathy, questioning, making links, looking for patterns of meaning, alternative ways of perceiving, noticing exceptions – knowing that through this focus learning will be generated in and of itself (“trusting the process”). This differentiates it from the “coach-expert” model in which the focus is on content and the mining of content to find the metal (essential truth). As a custodian of the space the social constructionist coach injects minimal external advice or problem solving. S/he moves away from mining the “facts” with the aim of uncovering and imposing some external “truth”. Rather, as custodian of the process, s/he appreciates that there is not one essential truth, but many ways of looking at the issues at hand. S/he trusts that everything required for learning/change/ transformation is already present and occurs through questioning from an attitude of curiosity, from a challenge of taken-for-granted frameworks of meaning in order to open the space for generating new possibilities.

Dialogue at a glance.

- Dialogue is a mutual, embodied discursive activity that creates bonds between human beings.
- We cannot, not respond

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- We experience dialogue as movement and flow, an embodied activity, movement between - reflecting back, moving forward, feedback, feed-forward, reiterating, and leading somewhere, the destination clear when we arrive.
 - Dialogue is transformative – everyone changes...not only coachee, but the changes will be unique and particular, therefore hard to generalise and capture.
 - “I” is dependent on “You”. This begins with our mothers when a few hours old, to “who” we continue to become over our lives. Coaching is about making and re-making ourselves – an art of the self.
 - In dialogue there is an intermingling of all aspects of our lives. This generates something unique and particular to the space which in turn generates possibilities for new meaning.
 - Each dialogue is a one-off, a unique event occurring between people at a certain time and in a certain context,
 - Because of this uniqueness, a single method or theory will not encompass it,
 - If we consider dialogue as generative rather than prescriptive then the focus must be on the dialogic flow not our pet theories/models/content