

Academic Paper

The use of contemplative practices to aid the development of a new coaching identity: An auto-ethnographic study

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Abstract

This paper looks at the use of contemplative practices to acquire a deeper understanding of my development as a coach. Adopting autoethnography as a methodology, I reveal how I used both digital and non-digital contemplative practices to develop a personal conceptual formation of what I consider a soul guide coach to be. Stemming from Western's (2017) discourse on soul guide coaching, I make a connection to three dominant, cultural perspectives that have influenced and shaped me. The paper highlights the potential of contemplative practices and addresses the gap of the lack of use of digital technology within coaching.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Contemplative Practices, Soul Guide, Coaching

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Introduction

Bachkirova (2016 p 5) asserts that “the focus on the self and reflexivity of the coach is the next step in coach development, enabling coaches to create their own unique style of practice and to be authentic in their role as a coach.” Western (2017) suggests that the soul space is hard to define, but the soul guide works in a variety of ways with certain aspects of the self. Drake (2007) advocates for becoming aware of connections that have shaped us, suggesting that coaches develop a higher level of understanding of intentionality about their practice and that the time has come for coaches to attempt to engage in self-coaching. Adopting auto-ethnography as a methodology, and using digital and non-digital contemplative practices, this paper illuminates the expedition that I engaged in to develop a critical first-person perspective of what I believe a soul guide coach to be. I explain how I used contemplative practices to move to the next stage of my coaching development.

The aim of the study was achieved by addressing three objectives:

1. To use and therefore experience a range of contemplative practices to better understand their potential use in a soul guide coaching context.
2. To use literature to aid a personal theoretical construction of what a soul guide coach might be.
3. To use contemplative practices to pay attention to dominant cultural perspectives that have influenced my position.

The paper begins by offering some insight into personal and professional cultural perspectives that have influenced me. I then provide a brief overview of the literature accessed relating to contemplative practices and digital technology. This is followed by consideration of my choice of autoethnography as a methodology my data collection methods and analysis, moving onto a discussion of my findings. The paper ends with a conclusion and recommendations for future research.

The Researcher as a Participant

As the researcher in an autoethnographic study I am also the main participant, (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) and therefore I believe it appropriate to offer some insight into three dominant cultural perspectives that influence me as a coach and offer some insight into who I am as a social product of my lived experiences, (Morey, 2010):

- First, my experience of being an elite international athlete, in the sport of Karate, where the preparation of the mind was a critical aspect of achieving high performance.
- Second, the extensive experience I gained as a professionally qualified Youth and Community Development Worker, where most of my practice was done within socially deprived communities, working for social justice, where deterministic components such as, personal agency and conative factors were highly influential in how I conducted my practice.
- Third, from me being me, a person who is fifty-nine years old, male and of dual heritage. My mother comes from a white, small urban working-class background and my father was of the "Windrush" generation, an immigrant from a rural upbringing in Jamaica.

Critically from a developmental perspective, I was fortunate to spend my formative years living between working class and privileged professional class environments which impacted on how I viewed the world. When combined, these perspectives offer some insight into me as a person, and the main participant of the study, and how these cultural perspectives have influenced my concept formulation and approach to being a soul guide. These cultural aspects of my life can also be interpreted as being reflective of how people with dual heritage, can challenge the theoretical and conceptual approaches to their cultural identities Aspinall (2003). It is also reflective of Western (2017 p. 42) who presents a "Foucauldian" discourse on the soul guide, considering how "patterns of knowledge and power are embedded in our social world, and shape and limit both how we think and our social relations".

Literature Review

The review of literature is divided into three sections that reflect what contemplative practices are, the role neuroscience has come to play within contemplative practice and the opportunity that technology offers coaching when working with contemplative practices.

Contemplative Practices

Davidson, & Dahl (2017) highlight the lack of research into contemplative practices and suggest that when researching contemplative practices, the type and purpose of the practice should be

considered. Contemplative practices are wide ranging and have been described as falling into three types: creative practices, movement practices and relational practices, (CMind, 2014). Categorising contemplative practices Zajonc (2016, p 19) identifies three broad domains, capacity-building, focussed content related and compassion and community exercises. A view that could be interpreted as, “perspective taking” where the assertion is that this is core to “human cognitive and affective development” and could have conative implications. Zajonc (2016, p 17) draws attention to the long history of contemplative practices and points to western traditions, where the Greco-Roman philosophical position suggests that “contemplation was understood as a process of forming the human being through education and training”. This could be interpreted as meaning contemplative practices are a way of working with the self to gain new knowledge and intellectual insight. To achieve this Roth (2014, p 3) proposes that contemplation includes the focusing of the attention in a sustained fashion leading to deepened states of concentration, tranquillity, insight, and “contextualizing” orientations. These views are reflective of my professional cultural influences related to areas of development and performance.

Contemplative Neuroscience

Zajonc (2016) also recognises the role contemplative neuroscience has come to play within the field of contemplative practice. However, Wallace (2007) suggests that the very concept of contemplative science challenges traditional notions of science, which have been based on assumptions made of contemplation but argues that science be considered in a much broader context than traditional views. Contemplative science has been defined by Dorjee (2016, p 3) as being concerned with the “Metacognitive self-regulatory capacity of the mind and associated modes of existential awareness, which is modulated by motivational/intentional and contextual factors of contemplative practices.” The issue of science being relevant here is due, in part, to the importance in coaching, currently placed on evidence-based practice and how evidence is considered, (Drake, 2007, 2009).

Contemplative Practices and Technology

A core aspect of the study was its engagement with technology. Weston (2017) suggests that in a post-modernist world, today’s soul guide is offered the opportunity to be innovative in how they advance their practice. Kanatouri & Geißler (2017) highlight that most empirical research within the coaching field has focussed on the use of smart telephones and that the area of other use of technology has been left wide open for research. Conclusions drawn from their study suggest the use of technology is continually evolving in the ways it can support coaching and with virtual reality, and other types of technology becoming more affordable applications for immersive coaching experiences may start to become more accessible. Focussing on the use of digital media within coaching, Kanatouri (2020) suggests that the use of technology presents coaches new levels of flexibility in their practice and offers a broader net to attract new clients. Influenced by my experience of doing youth-work I see this as being relevant to a demographic who have been labelled as being representative of generations X, Y and Z.

Methodology

While there are numerous definitions of what auto-ethnography is, Smith (2017 p 5), Koning & Moore, (2020 p 96) cite Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) definition as “an autobiographical genre of research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting personal lived experiences to the cultural.” Culture in this sense encapsulates a much broader view than traditional perspectives on ethnicity and includes professional cultures and importantly personal orientations (Pitard, 2017). This interpretation of auto-ethnography could be, considered to be, “a highly personalised” form of research, Smith (2017, p 5). Auto-ethnography does not focus on the capture of large demographic information, it is more concerned with the personal human conditions of intention, motivation,

emotions, and action, (Pitard, 2017). The auto-ethnographic approach for this study reflected Adams, et al. (2015), in that I lived this experience and by doing so I entered the realms of critical realism where I considered the analysis of this study was relative to my interpretations and construction of a soul guide coach, (Denzin, 2014). The choice between auto-ethnography and choosing a phenomenological methodology such as a heuristic enquiry, proved to be challenging. While there are similarities, Morey (2010 p 33) suggests that heuristic research sits within the theoretical tradition of phenomenology while auto-ethnography has evolved from the post-modernist tradition of ethnography, asserting that auto-ethnography is more concerned with the researchers understanding of the experience, and highlights a philosophical difference in how the research question is posed, where in auto-ethnography, the researcher asks, "How does my own experience of this culture connect with and offer insights about this culture, situation, event, and/or way of life?" While in heuristic research, the researcher asks, "What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?"

Data collection

Influenced by my sporting experience, over a focussed period of forty-two days, sixty digital and non-digital practice sessions, totalling forty hours, using ten different exercises were undertaken for exploratory and existential purposes. Generated data was recorded pre, during and post practice onto a voice recorder which was then transcribed ready for analysis. Some of the exercises were repeated several times, others were used only once. Exercises were conducted inside and outside in a variety of locations. Sessions were conducted in both standing and sitting positions with eyes both open and closed. Three different types of digital equipment and eight different software applications were used to assist the generation of data. To give additional structure to the study, an adaptation of the Heuristic mechanism as set out by Western (2017,) was used to help address my primary question and objectives for the study. This invited me to engage with a range of contemplative practices to think and reflect on the following four questions:

1. What do I consider a soul guide to be?
2. How have my lived experiences shaped my understanding of what a soul guide coach is?
3. How does this shape and influence my practice as a coach?
4. What purpose does, and will this serve me and the wider coaching community?

Using contemplative practices to focus on the first two questions I was able to monitor the efficacy of contemplative practices and by addressing questions three and four I was able to consider how I might integrate them into my own practice and consider implications to wider practice within the coaching field.

Analysis of data

I worked through six phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). This offered me a process to work from and to consider how to convey my understanding of what I had found in relation to my use of contemplative practices, my concept formulation and my enquiry into myself, (Chang, 2008). Following each practice session, a latent thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) was undertaken to assess the usefulness of the practice. This assisted the formulation of my concept of a soul guide helping me to gain insight into what lay behind the concept formulation. The practices used were placed into two of Zajonc's (2016), categories of contemplative practices. These were capacity-building exercises and content-related exercises. Voice recordings were transcribed and placed into a coaching reflective practice template which when assembled constituted a field notes journal. On completion of my data transcription, I proceeded to "gaze" at the data to begin to make sense of what it was telling me, (Chang, 2008, p. 126). What emerged was that the data reflected how I had used contemplative practices to support my journey to become a soul guide and that my use of digital equipment had produced evidence of

focus and attentional development. This allowed me to place them within Zajonc's (2016) categories based on the content of the data they had generated, either capacity building or content related and consider their efficacy. I identified three voices from within me that had guided me through a dialogue with myself. These voices reflected the voice of the researcher, the voice of the coach and the voice of the client. I interpreted these voices as reflecting my position as a researcher acting as a participant observer and as a coach and a client who were being observed. I realised that these voices, and therefore my data, had primarily addressed the four questions contained within my contemplative mechanism. This I found to be somewhat reflective of four domains of knowledge as presented by Drake (2009 p4), those being foundational, professional, self and contextual knowledge. I then took account of cultural factors within these domains. As an auto-ethnographic study, this required me to continually move between these domains and pay attention to which voice was speaking and the social and cultural context they were connected to, (Chang, 2008 pp. 125-126). A review of my data was undertaken considering issues of validity which required me to continually re-visit literature (Chang, 2008). I then began to consider my voices as themes, but this was rejected. I realised I needed to knit these voices into my auto-ethnographic narrative (Chang, 2008). However, recognition of the voices as potential themes guided me to revisit my data and begin to identify and separate these voices through a process of colour coding. This coding directed me to revisit Drake (2009) and consider further the cultural influences these voices had had on my concept formulation. When complete, the colour coded text was placed into a table for further analysis. This allowed me to understand where the voices were positioned as responses to the four questions of my contemplative mechanism. I revisited my field notes and divided them again to identify my use of digital and non-digital practices. Findings from the voices were then collated and summarised into one voice, my holistic voice. The outcome of my analysis left me with two broad themes which are visible within the study's primary question. The first was the utility of contemplative practices. Sitting within this theme my analysis of data identified four further themes, capacity building exercises, content related exercises, digitally enabled exercises, and non-digital exercises. The second broad area of analysis could be considered as being "methodologically nebulous" and is reflective of an auto-ethnographic enquiry, Chang (2008 pp. 125-126), but demonstrates how my use of contemplative practices helped me reveal a three staged evolution towards my own conceptual formulation of a soul guide.

Findings

My use of contemplative practices to address my research question indicated two significant areas of use, capacity building and content related contemplative practices with no attention being paid to the category of compassion and community, (Zajonc, 2016). This indicating where my attention was focussed and could be indicative on the importance, I place on working with the individual to improve performance and develop agency. This could be closely related to my experience of high-performance sport and the developmental nature of youth and community work. When describing soul guide coaching Western (2012), suggests that the soul space is difficult to define but what differentiates Soul Guide Coaching from other discourses is that the soul guide invites the individual to consider issues from several perspectives. This seems to have been achieved through my use of content related practices that aided me to engage with three personal dominant cultural perspectives that influence me as a coach and reflects Bachkirova (2016) who considers style of practice within the context of the development of the self within the coach. My concept of soul guide coaching evolved over three iterations using content related contemplative practices and by continually returning to literature. It is informed by Western's (2017) discourse on the soul guide, Harrell's (2018) concept of Soulfulness and Drakes (2007) fifth era of coaching and heavily influenced by the cultural perspectives that have shaped my worldview. The result is the construction of my own evolving conceptual definition of a soul guide, which can be found below

A concept in evolution

Soul guide coaching is a pragmatic integration of theoretical coaching perspectives including cognitive behavioural, existential, psychological and the transpersonal, incorporating a range of coaching genres, where the use of contemplative practices are central to the coach's toolkit. The soul guide's role is to support the client to work with their inner self by using contemplative practices in a variety of ways. Where the soul guide considers three aspects of mind and cultural factors, to support the client to develop their capacity to address problems of meaning and value to them. (Sailsman, 2020).

Content related exercises

Content related exercises are highly relevant to working with a specific issue, (Zajonc, 2016). The context of this study meant using them to help me understand how I have come to understand what a soul guide is and how my life experiences have shaped this view. Content related exercises used within the study were non-digital, and initially took a focussed awareness approach starting with a focus on the breath. However, over time they shifted to taking a more open attention approach and appeared to confirm aspects of Zajonc's (2016) categorisation. Findings also showed that open attention practices appeared to stimulate self-dialogue which was interpreted as being related to problem solving and can be associated with a solution-focussed theoretical perspective (Grant & Cavanagh, 2017). These exercises generated significant amounts of data in relation to concept formulation and personal enquiry into my "self". This, appearing to confirm their ability as tools to support work, in different ways, with the self, CMind (2014), Zajonc (2016), Roth (2014). However, my experience of these exercises also led me to realise the symbiotic relationship between capacity building and content related exercises, where the capacity of equanimity, concentration, attention, close observation, and the discernment of memories can also be improved, (Zajonc, 2016). My use of content related practices was generally done in an outdoor setting. Potential implications here led me to think about issues regarding the physical setting of my coaching practice, challenging a possible normative assumption that coaching sessions are conducted in what might be considered as a traditional therapeutic type of environment, where coach and client sit down together in a room. Being non-digital, these exercises allowed me to experiment and experience how I might use these practices in the future. Experimentation with these practices was based on how I could use music to stimulate self-dialogue making a cultural connection into my own lived experiences of coming from a dual heritage background, and then to generate a soundtrack for the study.

Capacity building exercises

Capacity building exercises focussed on the use of two instruments. A virtual reality headset and a consumer grade EEG headset. These practices were much shorter in duration and led me to consider the potential for their cyclical use where layers of the self are revealed and then discussed throughout the coaching process to enable deeper insight into the self, while at the same time allowing the client time to practice and develop their own technique. This approach could be described as circuit training for the mind and seems to confirm my use of contemplative practices as a soul guide with Western's (2017 & 2012), Roth's (2014) and CMind's (2014) statements regarding work with the self and Zajonc's (2016) categorisation of capacity building practices. My use of capacity building contemplative practices appears to be suited to both developmental and performance purposes and have the potential to be done away from a formal coaching session by the client as homework. This seems to confirm a historical view of contemplative practices being used to develop the individual through training, (Zajonc, 2016). However, this performance aspect of contemplative practices does somewhat put me at odds with Western's (2012) view of the soul guide engaging in performance related activities, even though it seems that this view was presented looking through a lens of organisational use of soul guide coaching. To counter this view, it could be possible to suggest that performance, in the context that I as soul guide would use it, is

more individually focussed, and relates to capacity building practices being used for the development in the performance of life in general or perhaps to develop spiritual intelligence to understand and address issues of great meaning or value, Zohar, & Marshall (2001), having the potential to impact on the individuals agency.

Using digital technology

The approach to the study recognised that unlike other disciplines such as counselling and psychotherapy there is no mandate for coaches to experience being coached themselves prior to starting practice, (Bachkirova, 2016). The suggestion has been made that it is important for practitioners to have some experience of the techniques that they intend to use in their practice prior to attempting to use these techniques with their clients, (Dunkley and Loewenthal, 2013 p. 106). This indicates a degree of expertise required by the coach when considering using digital equipment, particularly when moving to use specialist EEG equipment and venturing into the realms of neurofeedback where it would be recommended that additional training is undertaken. The use of eight virtual reality contemplative software applications was found to be generally useful for capacity development. Lasting no more than fifteen minutes, all the virtual reality practices I engaged with were reflective of embodied capacity building, again suggesting a developmental and performance aspect to them. The use of virtual reality contemplative practices seems to support Paula and Moretti (2021) who suggest that this approach could be used for the regulation of attention, and who also infer that the use of virtual reality and mindfulness-based practices facilitates an increased sense of presence. The use of technology supported contemplative practices appears to confirm the potential to use digital supported contemplative practices to work across two of Western's (2017) four discourses, the soul guide and the Psy expert and importantly could reflect a need for coaches to begin to consider the changing demographics of those who seek coaching interventions, i.e. those potential clients who are representative of generations X, Y and Z who have grown up with and are familiar with the use of technology. My use of consumer grade EEG equipment seems to contradict Acabchuk, Simon, et al. (2021) who suggest caution in the reliability of the data captured. However, consideration should be given to intention here. My purpose in this study was not to gather rigorous scientific data but to simply offer evidence of progression, going some way to address Drake's (2007) assertions regarding the requirements of the artisan coach and evidence generation.

Implications for practice

The hybrid nature of my concept, which is a pragmatic integration of theoretical coaching perspectives, means that developmental and performance elements could be built into a soul guide coaching process, where both capacity building and content related practices are used. The structure of my soul guide coaching intervention has also been considered, taking account of Harrell (2018), in terms of areas to explore within a coaching session or program. Which could mean using contemplative practices to work within three domains of spirit, psychology, and culture. The setting of a coaching intervention could also be considered when structuring a soul guide coaching session or program where contemplative practices are an integral feature of the overall approach, offering a degree of flexibility and innovation to the coach in terms of setting.

Understanding the self

Western (2012, p. 132), theorises that the soul guide works with the "Interior aspects of the self". My application of contemplative practices as tools, within the study helped me to critically engage with the complexities of my-self, thus confirming CMind's (2014) assertions, a view that supports Bachkirova, et al. (2017, p. 7) and goes some way to supporting the concept of the artisan coach made by Drake (2007). Implications for practice here are that, unlike reflective practice which occurs post event, (Jackson, 2004), contemplative practices are concerned with paying attention to

a topic in the now, and potentially require a different skill set. In this sense the development of the skills for both coach and client could prove to be highly beneficial to accelerating the outcomes of a coaching process. By adopting this reasoning, I considered the benefits in the use of contemplative practices to understand my own knowledge acquisition and how this has shaped me. This is a position reinforced by Bachkirova, et al. (2017) when discussing coach education, who argue for a re-conceptualisation from the perspectives of pragmatism and constructivism as a coaching philosophical position.

Training

Western (2012), suggests that to train to be a soul guide coach takes longer than other more technique based coaching approaches but offers no timescales for this. For me that would have meant being coached by a soul guide who used contemplative practices. However, if this training is either not available, difficult to access or does not exist this could prove to be challenging for coaches who wish to develop in this area. The interpretation of these assertions could be confusing when one considers that Bachkirova (2016) suggests that coaches create their own unique style of practice through work with the self and views this as a stage of the coach's development. This suggests that there is a point in a coach's development where this is appropriate and may not be for those new to the coaching field. However, the challenge would be when this developmental step would occur and who would make that decision. Such training implications and the time factors involved have potential implications when considering soul guide coaching's position as a genre, or a style of coaching, particularly within the broader coaching community which is attempting to discover an encompassing professional identity, Fillery-Travis and Collins (2017).

Technology

The use of digitally supported contemplative practices centred on two main approaches, virtual reality and consumer grade EEG technology and were mainly used for capacity building. However, there could be significant implications here regarding finance. First there is the initial cost to the coach, and or client, to purchase equipment. Should a coach wish to encourage the use of this equipment for out of session practice, the financial outlay by the client could become an issue for those who may not have the financial means. This issue is one that I have struggled with based on balancing my business acumen and access to these resources for those potential clients who come from financially challenged backgrounds. This may be less off putting moving forward as costs of this equipment continue to fall. When thinking about the role capacity building practices played within this study, the use of consumer grade EEG devices has been shown to have the ability to generate evidence of progression. The positive implication here is that while moving through a soul guide coaching process there is the potential to offer the client a perspective on their progression relating to the development of their ability to sustain mental states such as focus, concentration or calm. This is not only beneficial for the client but could also be useful for the coach when, for example, considering a client's commitment to change.

Areas for future research

Considering the findings of this study several areas for future research have surfaced. The issue of training was raised and there is potential for research into transitional points for coaches to develop and progress to the next level of their development that is not only based on academic competencies and capabilities but may also require levels of inquiry into themselves. One of the objectives of this study was for me to experience the use of contemplative practices. The next step could be to undertake research into the use of contemplative practices with individual clients. The use of technology has already been identified as an area that is under researched. Research might be undertaken into specific areas of virtual reality and EEG technology within a coaching context. Another potential area for research may come from implications to the normative use of coaching

settings and what impact the creative and varied use of settings may have on the coaching process and the relationship between coach and client through the coaching process.

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on how I used contemplative practices to develop a critical first-person perspective of what I believe a soul guide coach to be. When considering the various cultural perspectives that influence me, the study has helped me affirm that I have worked within the soul guide space for many years and that I have been soulful in my approach. My findings reflect my three objectives for the study which when considered together appear to confirm that contemplative practices have been an aid to my journey. The study has demonstrated how specific types of technology can be used within a coaching context and therefore responded to a gap identified by Kanatouri, and Geißler (2017), relating to the lack of use of technology within the coaching field. The subjective nature of autoethnography creates a difficulty with validation. However, I continually returned to literature to address this point, (Chang, 2008). The nature of this study meant undertaking and maintaining this piece of work was difficult at times which maybe in part due to the duality of the question posed that required me to consider both process and product, Smith (2017) and Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011) where I used the journey to become a soul guide coach to demonstrate how contemplative practices could aid me in that journey. Bachkirova (2016) asserts that work with the self and the coach's reflexivity is an important developmental step for a coach to take. It could be argued that this study has confirmed this through its use of contemplative practices to demonstrate how this developmental step was taken. However, what makes the approach different is the difference between reflexivity and contemplation, where I have reflected on my life to assess where I am now to facilitate where I want to go.

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