

Academic Paper

What is Best Practice in Online Coaching?

Hilary Meyer [✉](#)

Abstract

Online coaching is now the preferred platform for coaching across the UK (Passmore, 2021). However, there is little to no research on how to do it well. My study explored how coaching is affected by the online environment using a constructivist grounded theory approach, with a pragmatic ontology and a constructivist epistemology to produce a practical support framework for coaches. My research found two outcomes. The first emerged as a set of conceptual categories for reflection but it is the second outcome consisting of three practical themes for best practice that will be explored in this article. These are caring (the self-care of the coach) and contracting (key areas for coach and coachee to establish pertaining to the online space) which then ensures a better understanding of the third area which is communicating.

Keywords

online coaching, best practice, zoom, efficacy, communication

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Introduction

I was a trainee coach in 2019 when I began studying for my MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice. As a result, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was in a unique position because my only experience of coach training was online. In this training, however, the exemplars shown were of face-to-face coaching only, and not of online interactions. There has been inadequate reflection on online coaching, because of technology's continuous change, and the unique circumstances of the pandemic. Now is the time for that reflection.

Prior to 2019, there was an increased trend in online coaching. In 2017, 67% of all coaching was online (SHERPA 2020) and this rose to 85% in 2022 (Alaoui and Passmore, 2022). The "Working From Home" directive was a result of the unique situation created by the global pandemic which forced coaching online (Johnson, 2020). This trend will probably continue (EMCC, 2021) especially if another pandemic were to occur (Penn, 2021).

There are many benefits to coaching online: ease and accessibility (Ribbers and Waringa, 2015), potentially greater social diversity (Ghods and Boyce, 2013), privacy (Richards and Viganó, 2013), recording for reflection (Van Coller-Peter and Manzini, 2020) and a healthier way of working

generally (Spiggle, 2020). In all searches, much of the literature was based on data pre-pandemic and only articles in current newspapers referred to issues relevant to this study. There was no literature on the best practice of coaching online. The aim of my research is to understand what is best practice in online coaching and to produce a theory that supports the work of coaches online.

Literature Review

There was no literature that used the term “best practice” at all, however “doing it well” or “efficacy in coaching” were common terms and I would argue that these are synonymous with “best practice”. There were 1,631 results on EBSCO on coaching effectiveness alone (1997-2022), but scant material on online coaching. The word online is subsumed into virtual coaching, including both email and telephone coaching, which are very different.

A search of *online coaching*, produced very few results and no clear definition of the word “online” which included apps and blended coaching and not my focus of audio-visual coaching (Geissler et al., 2014; Kanatouri and Geissler, 2016; Ribbers and Waringa, 2015). To widen the search, I therefore included virtual “teaching” and “counselling”. Where research existed, it concerned the *challenges or benefits* of online coaching which I explored, believing that challenges would inhibit best practice, whereas benefits could be used to best effect.

Another gap that became evident was the under-representation of coachees’ perspectives (Berry et al., 2011; Ghods and Boyce, 2013b; Deniers, 2019; Kanatouri and Geissler, 2016) .

Although reported outcomes for online coaching were positive, many conflated different types of virtual coaching (Geissler et al., 2014; Kanatouri and Geissler, 2016; Ribbers and Waringa, 2015; Van Coller-Peter and Manzini, 2020) and did not explain *how* and *why* the outcomes were positive. The systematic review of Berry et.al (2011) asserted there was greater client participation online than in face-to-face coaching and no difference in establishing a successful working alliance but did not explain *how* this was achieved. Much literature also tended to be journalistic in nature (Britton, 2020; Murphy, 2020) rather than based on rigorous academic study. My study aimed to contribute to knowledge, using the lived idiography of participants from a critical constructivist standpoint.

Strategies for online coaching

Although sparse, some literature did cite specific strategies for best practice in online coaching (Berry et al., 2011; McKenna and Davis, 2009; Van Coller-Peter and Manzini, 2020; Britton, 2020). The qualitative interviews of Van Coller-Peter and Manzini (2020) showed the need for *intentionality* making the following practical suggestions: adjusting the webcam so eye contact is clear thus ensuring synchronicity, accommodating time-lag and avoiding distractions to ensure privacy. They concluded that “summarising” is more important online as the client particularly needs to believe they are being heard, a finding which was further supported by Britton (2020) in her examples of best practice.

Britton (2017) has added to strategies for best practice online identifying seven remote enablers for effective virtual conversations: communication, clarity, connection, consistency, community and collaboration. These are important but do not necessarily relate to *online* coaching alone. However, she contends some of these “enablers” are magnified online and, for best practice, coaches need to be more mindful of pace, interactivity and visual cues in the *online* space, again not identifying *how* to produce this.

Challenges of online coaching

A significant body of literature highlighted the challenges that inhibit best practice (Burnett, 2018; Deniers, 2019; Charbonneau, 2002; Frazee, 2008). Relevant research focused on how technical difficulties can generate negative emotions (Belli, 2018), the unsettling involvement of the camera (Deniers, 2019), and the lack of sensory experience (Burnett, 2018; Deniers, 2019; Geissler et al., 2014; Murphy, 2020; Belli, 2018; Kanatouri and Geissler, 2016) affecting the ability to read body language (Deniers, 2019). Kanatouri and Geissler (2016) address the lack of sensory clues and Whittaker and O'Connaill (1997) say this resulted in something inflexible, reductionist and unempathetic, for example it can be harder to spot that a client is crying online (Richards and Viganó, 2013).

Some scholars believe the ability to read emotion is diminished online (Murphy, 2020; Ribbers and Waringa, 2015), which is identified as a key factor in best practice by others (Palmer and McDowall, 2010; Parsloe and Leedham, 2009; Palmer and Whybrow, 2019). The interpretation of body language is *harder* to achieve online because only the upper torso is visible removing potentially informative body language (Ribbers and Waringa, 2015). To understand this better, Deniers (2019) and Belli (2018) studied facial mimicry and the interference of the camera when using Skype. Deniers (2019), in particular, found the camera detracted from establishing trust and impacted perceptions of self-image for coach and coachee who often became fixated on their "look". This study was useful as it did use the perspectives of coachees, but again this research did not give a solution to the problem, simply that the use of a camera can hinder online communication.

Murphy (2020) also contended it is unintentionally possible to appear disinterested or haughty on-screen, citing the fact that remote depositions in the USA have been questioned by the criminal justice system as a result. Further evidence of online spatial distortions of nonverbal cues, especially gaze and deixis (the process that makes it easier to have a better perception of the thought that is being transmitted), was found by Nguyen and Canny (2007). They argue that vital eye contact is affected by "weak" technology. Further to this, Ribbers and Waringa (2012) argue online communication gives the illusion of eye contact because the on-screen face is at eye-level, the camera pointed at the top of the head, so it is impossible to have direct eye contact online. Deniers (2019) and Bohannon et al. (2013) also refer to eye contact and cultural issues as direct eye contact can be deemed rude in some cultures, an issue that is harder to detect and resolve online.

Aural communication is also affected online. Kanatouri and Geissler (2016) assert the coach has to listen *more* carefully to quality and tone of voice for best practice, as tonal shifts can be lost. In fact, Brahmam (2020) argued the quality of aural communication through telephone-coaching is more sensitive and preferable to online sound but again this does not offer a solution of how to improve.

Best practice in the security and privacy of online platforms was addressed by some scholars (Barak, Klein and Proudfoot, 2009; Ghods and Boyce, 2013) as a significant issue. In best practice the cancelling of distractions such as email notifications was identified by Ribbers and Waringa (2015), also citing ethical issues of working in cyberspace. Richards and Viganó (2013) refer to ethical guidelines being drawn up by professional organisations but very little existed in the literature to explain how best to ensure privacy and security online.

Although technology has improved since 2007, problems with freezing, blurring, jerkiness and out-of-sync audio are still considered challenging. Reasons for the mismatch between what is seen and what is perceived to be seen were addressed by Niedenthal in 2020 asserting that brains are prediction generators, perceiving delays as errors that must be fixed, causing distress and exhaustion to the individuals concerned.

To summarise, the literature that exists is quite fragmented and did not have a clear focus on online coaching, especially with regard to the view of coachees. The aim of my research is to understand what is best practice in online coaching and to produce a theory that supports the work of coaches online.

Methodology

Research Philosophy

I chose constructivist grounded theory because it fitted with an ontological position of pragmatism (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019) embracing the post-modern belief that there are multiple realities where knowledge is fluid (Morse, 2021). Knowledge moves in different directions in time (Charmaz, 2014), and data and analysis are also social constructions relying upon social context (Blumer, 1969). This complexity is better understood through an interpretivist idiographic discourse as it is heuristic (Vincent, 1903) and hermeneutic (Husserl and Gibson, 2002). This suited my research question especially because technology is also fluctuating and my research needs to be understood within the context of process, change and a complex reality, interpreted by those experiencing it.

Why constructivist grounded theory (CGT)?

CGT suits studies which have been relatively under-researched (Chun Tie, Birks and Francis, 2019) and helps to understand what currently exists in terms of subject and context (Jackson and Cox, 2020). Crucially, this is from the point of view of those who are directly involved (Morse, 2021) and constructs theory from the bottom-up with data co-created with the participants (Charmaz, 2014).

CGT also assimilated my experience of coaching online: the co-construction of data through a working alliance (Page and de Haan, 2014), belief in the individual to find meaning-making (Rogers, 1995), interview techniques of intensive listening (Cox, 2013), open-ended questions (Passmore, 2014) and the ethos held within the coaching space (Carmichael and Cunningham, 2020) building up theory of practical use to those in the field.

Research design and data collection

I purposively sampled coaches and coachees with experience of online coaching before and during the pandemic, as in CGT construction is the focus, rather than population representativeness (Charmaz 2014). See table 1

The interviews in the pilot study evidenced many challenges which I addressed by: creating open-ended questions, keeping a note of my research question on my lap-top, (Saldaña, 2021), designing neutral “probes” to facilitate balance in questioning, focussing on “how” and “what” questions and slowing down my delivery, allowing for greater reflection (Schon, 1991). I video-recorded interviews which meant I was less likely to overlook data.

In the initial coding stage, I used Nvivo and coded line-by-line using gerunds that encouraged a lack of stasis, as a heuristic device. I then set up further interviews to explore themes that seemed to be emerging. While data saturation was the aim, I achieved theoretical sufficiency (Dey, 1999), within the time limits of this study. As my participants had been interviewed by me previously in the first round for initial data-gathering, it was interesting to note the greater depth of their responses, as they had had the time to reflect in the interim. The more abstract and disjointed method of

thinking in CGT also connected with my understanding of neural mapping as the analysis and interpretation of the data is not simply linear. Patterns emerged that were not obviously sequential.

Table 1: Characteristics of sample interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender	Age bracket	Experience in years
COACHES			
Patricia	Female	55-65	15
Theresa	Female	45-55	3
Jane	Female	45-55	5
Carmela	Female	35-45	3
Kieran	Male	45-55	7
Finn	Male	45-55	10
Jocelyn	Female	45-55	10
COACHEES			
Michael	Male	45-55	10
Thea	Female	45-55	4
Hazel	Female	35-45	2
Sandra	Female	45-55	9
Naomi	Female	24-35	3
Susan	Female	35-45	4
Callum	Male	55-65	3

Theoretical sufficiency focussed on concepts rather than words, which were integrated into the emergent theory through noting the “quotes that (wouldn’t) leave (me) alone” (Charmaz 2014, p.194). Then through theoretical sampling, in the second stage of coding, I used the most significant codes to organize this large amount of data resulting in three conceptual categories, which were: understanding technology, communicating and adapting. These formed outcome 1 whereas outcome 2 emerged as a set of more practical implications for online coaching, namely caring, contracting and communicating.

Memoing was vital and aided the reflexive process and a methodological self-consciousness for CGT (Morse, 2021) . Rigour, reflexivity and validity are contentious issues in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2006) but in my research, checking was a continuous process, as the researcher’s interpretations are seen as integral to the process and not separate, as Glaser (1992) would contend.

While the Grounded Theory of Corbin and Strauss (2015) advocates a separation from the existing literature, CGT encompasses an understanding that this desired intellectual vacuum is impossible and bias is understood through reflection. My own bias emerged, for example, from my experience as an online coach and my initial reluctance to engage with technology, fearing my own experimentation with it. This meant that memoing and reflection were key.

Line-by-line coding took time, but ensured the voices of the participants were integral to the analysis (Morse, 2021). Charmaz (2014) contends it is important not to intellectualize the lived experiences of interviewees which meant that potentially significant information was not disregarded, thus resonating with my research objective of understanding the experience of those involved in online coaching in order to build theory.

I recruited participants from both sides of the dyad to address the gap in the view of coachees and through recording interviews maintained an objectivity otherwise difficult to achieve and thus more likely to produce a relevant theoretical framework. I produced a participant information sheet clarifying that the study was entirely voluntary and participants were free to leave at any point (Creswell, 1998) and I specified interviews could be terminated at any time. I built in time for breaks and used my interview guide for reference ensuring questions were not pressurising or coercive. I checked the welfare of the interviewees and gave participants’ comfort level a higher priority than data-gathering and allowed space and time to understand responses. Finally, I ensured the anonymity of all participants for privacy and confidentiality.

Findings

All participants were positive about online coaching but my aim was to find out what was best practice. The themes that predominantly emerged were those of care needed for the coach, and how online coaching affected communication.

Care for the coach

Technology is undeniably convenient but this has an impact. The preference for working-from-home was paramount however many coaches also highlighted the lack of social interaction and particularly the associated self-care

“there is a real issue over the intensity of online working and coach burnout. You have to build in sessions to “de-intensify” the brain because the concentration is enormous online’, Jane (Coach).

The convenience also relies on wi-fi. When it does not work the results could be not just irritating but devastating for the coach, especially when dealing with a very distressed client as Jane reported:

“all of a sudden, his internet connection died and he disappeared. And it was terrible. I tried to ring him and he didn’t answer. Eventually he responded saying his connection went down. But that was a horrible experience”. Jane (Coach)

How communication is affected in online coaching

Visual communication

Although separated via a screen it came across strongly that coachees could display extreme emotion when online and this has a greater effect on the coach *“you feel so much more helpless when you cannot pass tissues through a screen”* (Jocelyn, coach). The use of intuition was also affected with many coaches believing they used it less because of the screen as Carmela (coach) noted, *“I tend to use my cognition rather than my intuition when online”*.

The variability of lighting from the screen and the position of the face (showing only the top half of a head and bottom of the chin) was cited by coaches and coachees alike, *“it was as if she really didn’t want me to see her which made the session so much more difficult”* Finn (coach). The ability to see the self evoked highly positive and negative feelings from both sides of the dyad *“I find it really interesting to see how I have reacted”* Susan (coachee) as opposed to *“I just hate seeing myself on screen”,* Patricia (coach). Similarly, the use of the false screen background, was an emotive issue with some coaches believing it helped focus on the coaching while others thinking it was artificial *“it means I can really concentrate on the client”,* Keiron instead of *“it is so false seeing hands that disappear”,* Finn.

The majority of participants believed communication worked very well online because the face was visible, thinking that eye contact was effective. Body language was also considered important but altered. Although only the upper half of the torso is usually visible online, (and not quite that sometimes) participants still said they were able to “read” body language although some coaches admitted to making gestures bigger online so knew their points were more convincing *“I know coaching works online because I can see visual expression and body language to get the point across more effectively”,* Keiron.

The choice of screen background (not digitally blurred but of the coach's space) also revealed something of the coaches themselves. Others noted the advantages to seeing on-screen images, as an insightful tool. Visible, reflex responses aided Susan (Coachee) who commented "*You've had these facial reactions and you realise what you've expressed and acknowledged it, which is really useful*".

Aural communication

Aural communication was emphasised with participants noting it was more important online where listening skills have to be more concentrated. Some coaches noted a greater relevance in the tone of voice they used and how important these implicit meanings could be. It was admitted that as visual cues were diminished online what was "heard" took on a greater significance. This was addressed by Carmela (coach) who said, "*you really listen better online because there are less distractions*". A few acknowledged that the recording of a session was a beneficial innovation as a reflexive tool, but this was the minority.

Some coaches addressed the issue of silence, not simply the quality of its sound, but how they felt obliged to say they were thinking during it and that had to be conveyed to the coachee. Face to face, an intake of breath can clearly signify that someone is about to speak but this effect is also dampened online "*when you are in the room with someone you know when to contribute, but I just don't get those cues online*", Naomi (coachee). Nevertheless, all coachees referred to rapport being established successfully even though some had not expected it to work and all coaches felt that the process took longer "*it definitely takes longer to establish rapport online*" as identified by Theresa.

Audio quality and time-lag were highlighted as something "*to get used to*", Keiran (coach). The quality of silence was also mentioned and how it can be more or less oppressive as Susan (coachee) acknowledged "*I find silence much less intense online, I have the freedom to think*".

A final communication issue which emerged connecting aural and visual communication was that of effective privacy and security when communicating online. This concerned two particular areas for coaches. The first identified physical issues (such as distractions in the physical space) leading to a lack of privacy. This was further compounded by distractions in the electronic space where pop-up messages from other devices could impede privacy as well. This was noted by Theresa (coach) "*make sure you are in a safe space. One lady was interrupted three time, so rapport was broken three times! And online pop-ups distracted her as well*". The second was that of online security so that firewalls, for example, need to be suitably robust to guard against security breaches as addressed by Finn (coach) "*you just have to have decent online security systems, that is non-negotiable*".

Suggested Guidelines for Best Practice

As a result of my research, caring and contracting leading to best practice in online communicating emerged as key themes for best practice in online coaching generally. These are areas that should be considered by the coach. Firstly self-care, as highlighted by Jane (coach) "*you need to give yourself that down time as it is so intensive*" which means the coach should build in time before and after sessions to "de-intensify" the brain.

Secondly, in contracting, a set of topics should be discussed with the coachee purely about the online space, especially as there are conflicting opinions on what should happen as evidenced by the two different views below:

"*I much prefer to see myself*" "*I hate seeing myself on screen*". The set of topics are shown in the figure 1 below, under the headings of technology, the screen, audio and security.

Figure 1: Contracting protocols

CONTRACTING		
AREA TO DISCUSS	WHAT TO DO	WHEN and WHY
Technology	Have a plan B	If wi-fi fails
	No tech distractions eg turn off phone	To ensure safe space
	Have more sessions	Takes longer to establish rapport
Visual (screen)	Good lighting	So face can be seen
	Raise the screen	So face is central on screen
	Background blurred or not	Discuss preference
	Choice of items displayed in background	To “welcome” and “share” something personal.
Audio	High-quality microphone	Clarity of sound
	Time-lag	Understand and accommodate
	Silence	Understand and agree protocols for when it happens e.g. thinking time
	Recording	For reflection
Security	Secure protocols	Discuss and agree

The establishment of online protocols should then lead to best practice in communication for coaching online: visually, aurally and holistically.

Discussion

Coach self-care

Much of the extant research echoed my findings. First, the biggest challenge identified by coaches during the Covid-19 pandemic, was “isolation” or “managing emotional content” (Passmore, 2021). There are no opportunities to take a break from a “captive” audience (Deniers, 2019) and coaches reported physical symptoms such as headaches and dizziness (Henderson, 2020), largely as a result of “screen stare”(Lewis, 2022) and multi-tasking (Leroy, 2009) which is exhausting (Isaacson, 2021) especially on Zoom (Miser and Oram, 2022). This intense concentration can contribute to burnout (Miser and Oram, 2022; Murphy, 2020). The brain is having to do more work leading to digital concussion (Huberman, 2021), hence the need for preparation and downtime reflected in my data.

Secondly, the literature supported my findings in the need for a fast and stable internet connection (Ribbers and Waringa, 2012; Richards and Vigano, 2013). Without this, the flow of the coaching is interrupted, spoiling the rapport (Belli, 2018) producing a sense of disturbance (Murphy, 2020) . If a distressed client were to be “lost”, as in my findings, there is a need for a plan B.

A divergence was that in the literature it was noted it was harder to assess the client’s emotional state (Ribbers and Waringa, 2016; Richards and Vigano, 2013) but this is not what was reported to me. However, the fact that coaches said they were more intensely affected emotionally, through online work, feeds into the discourse on self-care for the coach.

Contracting to clarify communication

Issues over screen-image appeared in my data and this was supported in other research specifically referring to the significance of good lighting, for example, (Murphy, 2020; Day and Schneider) recognising that this should be agreed in advance of coaching. Communicating online is different and my findings were supported in the literature (Henderson, 2020; Dimberg, Thunberg and Elmehed, 2020; Sonnby-Borgstrom, Jonsson and Svensson, 2003). Facial features are less distinct affecting gaze and deixis (Nguyen and Canny, 2007) and all these were reported by my participants.

Some areas emerged strongly in my data but not at all in current research. For example, seeing both faces during dyadic coaching emerged as a highly emotive issue in my data. This links with the potential blurring of the background, unique to online work. Some found this incredibly off-putting but others reported it as an aid to focus. Also, communicating via the screen background emerged in my data, as a way of welcoming the client, but was not referenced much elsewhere. Some scholars noted that screen background can be distracting (Ribbers and Waringa, 2012; Van-Coller and Manzini 2020) which is negative or that coaches can intentionally convey signals about themselves (Isaacson, 2021) which is positive. Either way this needs discussion in contracting.

Although none of my participants said they felt impelled to check their appearance online, it was keenly felt by many that they either strongly preferred not to see themselves at all or that they did, believing their own reactions were an insightful tool. The reasons for this were not found in the literature, suggesting a need for further study and an establishment of preferences when coaching online.

Similarly, there was no research at all as to the quality of online sound, time-lag and silence and yet it was brought up by my interviewees. For example, silence was considered both more or less oppressive in my data. Coaching research has explored the significance of silence in coaching (Kline, 1999), contending there is a clear link between silence and rapport (Sharpley, Munro and Elly, 2005), but these studies do not consider *online* silence. My data even referred to the effect of communication via audible breathing but again this was not mentioned in research.

On the other hand, in the literature, recording was cited as an aid to reflection (Carson and Choppin, 2021; Kanatouri and Geissler, 2016; Isaacson, 2021), enabling a more in-depth, understanding (Isaacson, 2021) but this benefit was not greatly reflected by my participants and would need to be agreed in advance.

Concerns over online privacy and security are cited as highly important in the most recent literature (Isaacson, 2020; Passmore, 2021) and although it did appear in my data, the prevailing concern was of disruption and distraction. The Henley report (Passmore, 2021) does not clarify whether “distraction” refers to technological (online) or physical (in the room), and I could not find research that clearly showed to what extent privacy was infringed by either, except that it was a challenge. In fact, online security was only mentioned by two of my interviewees and GDPR was not mentioned at all, however it is of concern (Alaoui and Passmore, 2021). At the very least, coach and client need to understand what type of data is being stored, where and who controls this (Day, 2022) with clear strategies in place (Rutschman, 2022). While my data and the literature did not converge on the significance of privacy and security online, its “difficulty”, is perhaps the reason it did *not* emerge and could even indicate a reluctance to engage with the issue by many. I would argue this is a compelling reason to include it in the contracting discussion and certainly in best practice in online work.

There were differing opinions on building rapport online, some believing it to be highly successful (Carson and Choppin, 2021; Deniers, 2019) but others disagreeing, suggesting both parties needed to invest more *intentionally* to create that connective chemistry (Van Coller-Peters and Manzini, 2020). The fact that it can take longer and can be less intimate (Passmore, 2021) was

echoed in my research. In fact, even though it can be achieved online, the difficulty of building relationships virtually, emerged as the second biggest downside for coaches in the Henley Report (Passmore, 2021) and both my data and the literature were in agreement over this, suggesting that there needed to be more online sessions in order to accommodate this, again to be agreed during contracting.

Communication online

On the theme of visual communication there were differences of opinion in the literature and also within my data. For example, the visibility of the eyes was felt to be key and achievable by my participants but Deniers' study (2019) contends the reductionist set-up online diminishes the variability of gaze and eye contact inhibiting trust (Murphy, 2021). Ribbers and Waringa (2012) concluded what remained was the *illusion* of eye contact. Conversely, some scholars believed less successful eye contact could be advantageous leading to greater attunement to the coachees (Isaacson, 2021). This lack of visual intensity enables coachees to disclose more readily (Isaacson, 2021) and this was also supported in some of my findings.

Another area where the literature and my data diverged was in reading body language, highlighted in my data as significant and successful online. Some coaches made visible gestures bigger for emphasis, especially using the hands, but some research suggests this could lead to an inaccurate sense of what is being conveyed (Kuhnke, 2016) with a risk that online body language is altered to fit an "online persona", as if there is a "real-life" personality and an *online* presence as well (Lussier, 2013). Although this idea of suiting an image to a situation is not in itself new, (James, 1890), the contemporary issue of online and offline personalities is causing concern (Chamorro-Premizi, 2015). The exaggeration of gesture did not emerge in the literature per se, but could be seen as artificial, if negative, or a necessary adaptation to the online platform, if positive. There is a potential level of deception within this idea of an online persona, to be explored, which also feeds into the social constructionist narrative now encompassing online norms of behaviour (McMahon, 1997). This links with the idea of intentionality and online image generally.

Conclusion

As a result of this research the three areas of coach self-care, contracting and communication emerged as key to best practice. This study used constructivist grounded theory as it was based on the lived experience of the participants, including the coachees and also generated this framework as a practical support (Charmaz, 2014). The pandemic concentrated the use of technological advances in coaching and the need for reflection on this practice was overlooked, which makes this study highly relevant.

Little research has been published on best practice in coaching online. Consequently, this research will offer practical help for training and work in the field. More than anything, my study suggests a need for further research and reflection. In training, there should be access to clear examples of effective online coaching where guidance and assessment is built-in and this study contributes to an understanding of this.

Contracting protocols have been designed so that aspects of online coaching can be discussed in advance providing a mutually agreed understanding and springboard for reflection as it continues. So much communication is now conducted online, this study could easily support the work of counselling and teaching, for example, where similar communication issues have been identified. The CGT approach is well-designed to produce ideas that are relevant beyond the origins of the study (Charmaz, 2014) and therefore the protocols could be used in these professions as well.

Undoubtedly there were limitations. With a greater number of participants theory development could be more robust, a longitudinal study would show results over time, there is a bias towards online coaching admitted by all but not interrogated and finally, a comparison of online and face-to-face interviews might well unearth the detail of what is distinct about working online and how it can be addressed. An overwhelming limitation of a highly interpretative study such as this could be researcher bias which I addressed through continuous personal reflection, my supervisor and my research buddies.

Areas for further research are practical and psychological. Practical: in how to use the visual image or audio-production, the use of online tools such as Jamboard considering how they work best in coaching and in assessing how platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Skype compare, if one is more suitable for coaching. Psychologically, investigating the diminishing of the multi-sensory experience online, the use of the screen and, especially, how this affects the self-image is pertinent. Understanding the potential presence of an online persona is a contemporary area of social and psychological significance. Training models for online coaching are certainly needed, focussing on technological issues and how matters relating to the coaching process are affected online. While this study has highlighted “*what*” best practice may be online, further studies could consider in more detail “*how*” and “*why*” each aspect works as this would give a greater understanding of the elements of best practice. Finally, research into technological advances such as artificial intelligence (Isaacson, 2021) would be highly beneficial, so that reflection could keep abreast with current trends as much as possible.

This study is a new contribution in that it offers practical suggestions, which are intended to make a contribution to an understanding of best practice in online coaching, to be of use to online coaches and coachees everywhere.

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About the author

Hilary Meyer is an educational consultant and coach. Following her first degree in Music she worked as a teacher in Secondary schools for many years and after completing the NPQH, a Senior Leader and Headteacher. She recently obtained her Master's in Coaching and Mentoring and has a strong interest in virtual coaching and online communication.