

Reflections from the Field

Assessing the effectiveness of group based reflective practice for coaches

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Abstract

Reflective practice, a well-established professional development approach, involves learners enhancing their capability through deliberate, systematic evaluation of their thinking and actions. This study used a client-generated outcome measure and a coaching relationship measure to assess the effectiveness of group-based coaching development. It provides preliminary evidence that sessions reduced the level of concern for issues where participants received coaching, while levels of concern for issues that were not coached remained static.

Participants rated the coaching relationship very highly. The study presents some evidence for the value of group-based reflective practice sessions, however, further research is needed to assess the finding's generalisability.

Keywords

reflective practice, coaching skills, coach psychology, group training, developmental effectiveness

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Introduction

Reflective practice has gained wide recognition as a professional development tool however little work has been done in evaluating its effectiveness (Richard, Gagnon and Careau, 2019). The present study used a client-generated outcome measure and a coaching relationship measure to assess group-based coaching skill development.

Dewey (1933), an early writer on reflective learning in the education profession, defined this practice as “the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). Grant, Franklin and Langford (2002) suggested that reflective practice is the “inspection, evaluation and clear understanding of one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour.” (p. 821). Sellars (2017) proposed that reflective practice is the process of “deliberate, purposeful, metacognitive thinking and/or action ... to improve ... professional practice” (p. 2).

Reflective practice has been widely used in a range of occupations as a professional development approach to encourage continuous learning (Brandt, 2014; Schön, 1983, 1987). It has been employed in education training since 1933 (Dewey, 1933), in psychoanalysis with Freud's reflections upon his emerging theories (Jones, 1953), in social science group work (Lewin, 1951), in developmental psychology (Piaget, 1978), in psychotherapy and counselling (Stedmon & Dallos, 2009) and in organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). This approach has also been used in clinical psychology, for example, Bennett-Levy, Turner, Beaty, Smith, Paterson and Farmer (2001) developed a structured approach to the training of Cognitive Behavioural Therapists (CBT). The approach involved therapists using a range of CBT techniques to deal with their own personal issues and then using a period of formal reflection and evaluation. This reflective practice was undertaken as an experiential phase of a training programme where the student reflections were shared, although this only covered the use of the therapeutic process rather than the content of the experience (Bennett-Levy, Thwaites, Haarhoff and Perry, 2015).

Reflective practice has become increasingly influential as an approach to professional development for coaches (Hay, 2007, McCormick, 2021, 2023). The major international professional coaching bodies have also recognised the importance of reflective practice as a key competency for coaches. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) Global Competence Framework V2 (EMCC, 2015) includes the phrase "Builds further self-understanding based on a range of theoretical models and structured input from external sources with rigorous reflection on experience and practice." (p. 6). The International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2019, 2021) that aims to set high standards in coaching, provide independent certification and build a worldwide network of coaching professionals. The ICF Core Competencies released in October 2019 and revised in July 2021 include the *Embodies a Coaching Mindset* competency and the phrase, 'Develops an ongoing reflective practice to enhance one's coaching' (p. 2). The Association for Coaching Competency Framework includes No. 9 *Undertaking Continuous Coach Development* and states the following, "Actively reflects on coaching practice and outcomes. Acts on own critical reflections and client feedback to improve coaching practice. Participates in regular coaching supervision to reflect on and improve practice." (AC, 2021, p. 6). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2021) indicates that "Reflective practice is the foundation of professional development; it makes meaning from experience and transforms insights into practical strategies for personal growth." (p. 2).

Types of reflective practice

There is a wide range of reflective practice models and methods with McCormick (2021, 2023) outlining seven different types that can be used by coaches. These are:

1. Individual informal reflection where individuals schedule a regular time and identify some important questions, such as "What went well in that last session and how can I build upon this next time?" They select a reflection process, for example: a journal, recording a conversation on a phone, or using a structured reflective practice exercise. The critical feature of this type of reflective practice is developing a regular, structured process to consider and improve professional practice.
2. Individual workbook-based reflection which involves developing a self-paced personalised structured learning programme. This approach involves selecting a relevant article, book, video or training programme and using a systematic approach of understanding, applying, reflecting, learning and improving.
3. Workbook-based reflective practice in pairs, which is similar to the individual workbook-based approach but, because the reflection involves a second person, it is critical that clarity about both psychological safety and confidentiality are established at an early stage.
4. Supervision with reflective practice which involves, not only the usual discussion about recent cases, but also provides the supervisee with the opportunity to be coached on their own personal issues and then have time for reflective practice on this. Giving the coach the

opportunity to be in the 'clients chair' provides valuable developmental insights into the challenges of personal change.

5. Peer group reflective practice which involves small groups of coaches, establishing psychological safety, working together to learn new skills, applying these to themselves, reflecting on this personal application, sharing their experiences, learning from them and applying these learnings to their own coaching psychology practices.
6. Classroom and training-based reflective practice which has been applied in a range of areas including the development of CBT practitioners (Bennett-Levy et al., 2001). In the coaching context, trainers can use a coaching text, have students study this, select a relevant coaching model, apply this to a personal issue of their own, discuss their experience in the classroom, and then apply the lessons learned to their own coaching psychology practice. This form of reflective practice can involve classroom discussions which are restricted to the *process* of coaching application with no necessity for students to disclose the *content* of their own self-coaching. This can be a useful method of creating psychological safety in a larger group.
7. Intensive group-based triple reflective practice – this is an advanced form of reflective professional development for coaches. Using this approach a small group of coaches meet for a full day, establish psychological safety then each participant is given one hour of coaching from a senior experienced practitioner. After each of these coaching sessions the participant has the opportunity to reflect on their experience and to get feedback from their peers and the coach (McCormick, 2021, 2023). The process has multiple levels of reflection: each participant experiences what it is like to be coached rather than to be the coach, they can observe a range of live coaching sessions in practice, and they can receive feedback from the other members of the group and from the coach, have the chance to reflect on this, learn from it and consider how they can apply it to their own professional practice.

Designing reflective practice sessions

Freeston, Thwaites and Bennett-Levy (2019) have identified three key principles that can be used in designing and implementing reflective practice sessions: process, structure and content.

The first key principle is process, issues involve 1. matching the type of learning used to the level of development of the participants, 2. ensuring that when working with experienced coaches in these settings that the learning is directly applicable to their professional practice, 3. having the level of learning strike the right balance between too high or too low – neither threatening nor uninteresting, 4. adding new material at a rate that the participants can readily absorb, 5. in line with adult learning principles the programme should be self-directed, experiential and focus on real world competency development, 6. the programme should also explicitly include a structured process of reflection.

The second key principle emphasises the importance of structure issues and includes 1. that the session needs to follow in a logical progression that makes sense to participants and 2. the session leader should be a capable and experienced coach who has a clear role and can generate a high level of trust in the group.

The third principle involves 1. adjusting the content to ensure that it is directly applicable to the development of the participants and 2. the content should be presented in a way that enables effective reflection, for example having participants reflect on their coaching experience immediately after it has been completed.

The benefits of an effective design include that it enables participants to work on their own personal issues, to understand at an experiential level the subtleties and complexities of coaching, to build a strong common bond with other participants and to increase their professional and personal confidence (McCormick 2021).

Reflective practice has been applied and its effectiveness evaluated in a range of areas such as education (Osterman, 1990), health and social service professionals (Richard, et al., 2019) and sports psychology (Cropley, Hanton, Miles and Niven, 2010). However little research has been undertaken to evaluate reflective practice in coaching psychology. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of reflective practice in intensive group-based triple reflective practice.

Measuring effectiveness in reflective practice sessions

McCormick (2023) has advocated the use of client-generated outcome measures (CGOMs) in evaluating reflective practice. CGOMs have been developed to assess situations where each client presents with a different set of challenges or issues to deal with. An early example of a CGOM is the Personal Questionnaire developed by Shapiro (1961). The Personal Questionnaire was designed to assess psychological symptoms that were relevant to the specific issues of the client and their circumstances (Shapiro, 1961). This measure is ideally suited for situations where the client's set of issues are unique and cannot be adequately covered by any of the standard measures (Morley, 2013). A review of the psychometric properties of the Personal Questionnaire (Elliot, Wagner, Sales, Rodgers, Alves and Café, 2016) found it was reliable (test re-test before the start of therapy coefficient of .57, and pre- and post-therapy coefficient of .41), and valid (good correlations with standardised measures of distress; the weighted between-client mean coefficient was 0.41)

The Personal Questionnaire does not use pre-selected items that have been pre-tested in a larger sample of participants but has the following distinguishing features (Morley, 2013). The content of each of the items is developed by the individual client and the scale (range) of experience covered in each question is agreed with and calibrated by the client. McCormick (2023) has suggested that the Personal Questionnaire is well suited to assessing the impact of coaching and in particular the effectiveness of group reflective practice sessions for coaches. The method allows each group participant to identify a range of challenges or issues they want to be coached on. These issues become the individual items in the Personal Questionnaire. In addition, each participant rates the severity of the issues they faced in terms of the extent they are bothered by them on a seven-point scale (1= not at all to 7 = maximum possible). The assessment of how bothered the person is by the issue is assessed before and after the reflective practice session.

Group reflective practice sessions as developed by McCormick (2023) involve each participant receiving one hour of coaching. Given this limited time period participants were asked to identify challenges or issues to work on that were mid-range in terms of severity, neither trivial nor existential in nature. Participants were also asked to identify issues that they would feel comfortable to work on in the group format, that involves being coached in front of their peers.

Before and after measures of problem severity are important when assessing coaching effectiveness (McCormick, 2023), however it is also well known that the quality of the relationship or working alliance between coach and client is a critical factor in the successful outcome. The coaching alliance, which is closely related to successful outcomes, is the quality of the engagement between coach and client and their ability to collaborate in productive work together over the course of the coaching (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010).

There is now a range of studies that have evaluated the impact of the working alliance on coaching outcome. Graßmann, Schölmerich and Schermuly, (2020) undertook a meta-analysis using 27 coaching samples ($N = 3,563$ coaching processes) and found a moderate and consistent relationship between the working alliance and the client's perceived coaching outcomes. The study indicated that the strongest relationship was between the working alliance and positive affective and cognitive coaching outcomes. Graßmann et al., (2020) also found that these results were independent of the number of coaching sessions, the type of clients, the level of coaches' expertise and the clients' or coaches' perspectives.

One useful example of a working alliance measure is the Session Rating Scale (SRS). It was developed after research studies indicated that a positive alliance relationship was one of the best predictors of therapeutic outcomes (Duncan & Miller, 2000; Duncan, Miller, Sparks, Claud, Reynolds, Brown and Johnson, 2003,). A 10-item version of the SRS was used with a Likert-type scale to measure client perceptions of the quality of the working alliance (Duncan et al., 2003). Subsequent use of this measure by practitioners suggested that the measure was too long so a shorter version was developed which assessed (1) the bond between therapist and client, (2) goal agreement and (3) task agreement. A fourth item was later added to the scale asking about the fit of the session with the client's needs (Duncan et al., 2003). These four items were used by McCormick (2023) who also added a fifth item 'The session assisted me to improve my coaching practice' to enhance the applicability of the measure to group based reflective practice sessions for coaches. The revised measure is called the Reflective Practice Session Rating Scale.

In summary this paper evaluates the effectiveness of group-based reflective practice using both the Personal Questionnaire and the Reflective Practice Session Rating Scale which were modified to better fit the requirements of group based reflective practice sessions.

Method

The study involved 19 group-based reflective practice sessions which were undertaken with 31 individual coaches who were coached on 100 unique issues.

The one-day sessions included the following steps: firstly a welcome to the session and a discussion on each participant's journey into coaching psychology, a discussion about the group-based reflective practice model and how it works, identification of each participant's goals and expectations for the day, a discussion on the importance of keeping a journal during the day so that participants could reflect and write up their learning and insights, an exercise to establish psychological safety and define confidentiality, a brief presentation on the coaching model that would be used during the day. The first coaching session then took place and the participant had the opportunity to reflect on what it was like to be in the 'clients shoes', the participant was then given feedback from their peers and from the group's coach. After this, all other participants were given the opportunity to receive one hour of coaching and undertake reflection based on the group's feedback. Throughout the session a focus was put on what the participants learned by being coached, by seeing live coaching sessions and how these insights could be applied to their own professional practice.

The coaching psychology model used in these group-based sessions was solution-focused coaching (Grant, 2019), which includes the following assumptions: positive change can happen rapidly in coaching, focusing on solutions is more helpful than focusing on problems, the client's challenges or problems are defined in the client's own terms and are not a sign of any pathology, the coach strives to use the client's existing resources to generate the solution, positive change is inevitable in coaching, each client is unique, so all interventions are tailored to the individual and the emphasis is more on looking forward rather than looking back to the past.

Participants completed the Reflective Practice Session Rating Scale (McCormick, 2023) before and after the reflective practice sessions. They identified up to four problems or issues for which they wanted coaching in the session and also rated the severity of these problems in terms of the extent they bothered them on a seven-point scale (1= not at all to 7 = maximum possible).

The coaching during the reflective practice session typically covered only one problem or issue, due to time constraints, so the remaining issues were not covered. This approach enabled a comparison of before and after measurement of coached versus non-coached issues. This resulted in 100 before and after ratings on coached items and 52 non-coached before and after ratings.

At the end of the reflective practice day session, each participant completed the modified version of the Reflective Practice Session Rating Scale. The items covered the quality of the coaching relationship, the relevance of the coaching to the individual, the fit of the coach to the participant, the degree to which the session assisted the participant to improve their coaching skills and the general relevance of the session to the participant. To ensure confidentiality the first author summarised and anonymised participants' ratings before the analysis was undertaken.

Results

The completion rate for both measures was 100%. Analysis of the Reflective Practice Session Rating Scale indicated that when the coached and non-coached items were considered, coached issues were on average, slightly more of a 'bother' than those not coached (respectively 5.07 and 4.71 on the 7-point scale – an approximately 4% difference). Both distributions (the ratings of issues coached and those not coached) had similar variances (standard deviations respectively 1.11 and 1.02). These mean ratings are comparable to those presented by Elliot (2015), who reported most pre-treatment ratings were around 5 with a standard deviation of around 1.

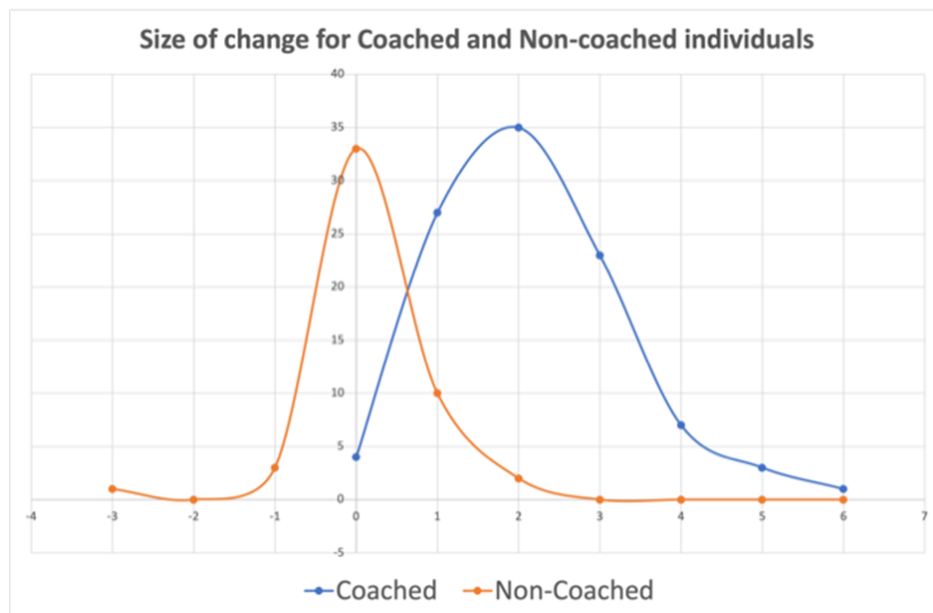
Table 1 shows that there was a large difference between the means of the issues coached and those not coached in the 'after' ratings (2.89 and 4.54). Again, the variances of these two distributions were similar (1.02 and 1.19 respectively for coached and non-coached issues).

Table 1: Coached and Not Coached Issues

	Coached issues		Not coached issues	
	Before	After	Before	After
N	100		52	
Mean	5.07	2.89	4.71	4.54
Standard deviation	1.11	1.02	1.02	1.19

For each of the conditions (coached and not coached) difference scores were calculated between the 'before' and 'after' ratings. These difference scores are presented in Figure 1 – illustrating the size of the change for issues that were coached and not coached.

Figure 1: Size of Change for Coached and Non-coached Individuals

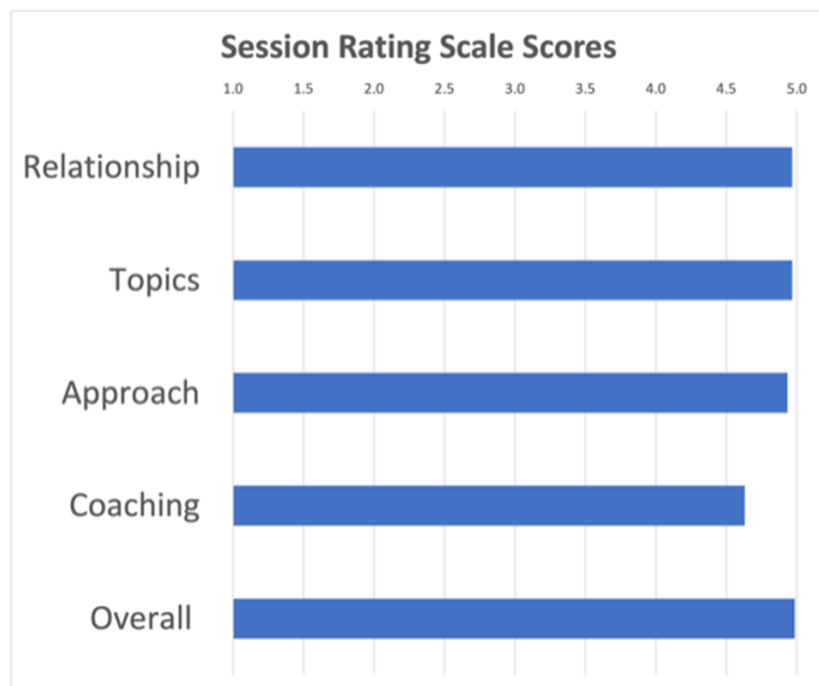


The mean change score for coached issues was +2.16 (standard deviation of 1.17), and for non-coached issues, it was +0.17 (standard deviation of 0.77). None of the coached issues were more bothersome after coaching, in the sense of the rating of the 'bother' of this issue was higher after coaching than before. However, some of the non-coached issues were more of a bother later. Both distributions were approximately normal in distribution.

The difference between the coached and non-coached items was significant ($t = 12.25$, $df=133$, $p<.001$), and of a large effect (Cohen's $d = 2.01$). This is a larger effect size than reported by Elliot ($d = 1.25$).

The Reflective Practice Session Rating Scale data showed that the participants rated the sessions very highly. The Relationships item was 'I felt heard, understood and respected' and the average score was 5 on the 5-point scale. The Topics item was 'We worked on and talked about what I wanted to work on and talk about' and the average score was 5 on the 5-point scale. The Approach item was 'The coach's approach is a good fit for me' and the average score was 4.9 on the 5-point scale. The Coaching item was 'The session assisted me to improve my coaching practice and the average score was 4.6 on the 5-point scale. The Overall item was 'Overall, today's session was right for me' and the average score was 5 on the 5-point scale. These results can be viewed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Session Rating Scale Scores



Conclusion

This article provides positive preliminary data for using the reflective practice method as part of the development of coaches. The study used a group-based reflective practice approach that was developed by McCormick (2023) to enable coaches to enhance their capability. The approach, called intensive group-based triple reflective practice, is an advanced form of reflective professional development. In this approach a small group of coaches meet for a full day, establish psychological safety then each participant is given one hour of coaching from a senior experienced practitioner, in front of their peers. After each of these coaching sessions the participant has the opportunity to reflect on their experience and to get feedback from their peers and the coach (McCormick,

2023). The process has multiple levels of reflection: each participant can understand what it is like to be coached rather than to be the coach, they can observe a range of live coaching sessions in practice, and they can receive feedback from the other members of the group, have the chance to reflect on this, learn from it and consider how they can apply it to their own practice.

The preliminary data in this paper has shown that participants significantly reduced their level of concern (how much they were bothered) about their own individual issues or problems when they were coached on these matters. The level of concern, before and after the session, has been shown to remain approximately the same for issues that they were not coached on. These results were achieved with a single hour of solution-focused coaching for each participant. The data also demonstrated that the process engendered very high levels of satisfaction from participants about the quality of the coaching relationships as measured by the Reflective Practice Session Rating Scale.

While this study has encouraging findings there is a need for more research. Firstly, the study involved a single experienced practitioner as the group session coach so further research is needed to demonstrate that this type of reflective practice approach can be generalised across a range of experienced practitioners. The study was conducted using coaches in New Zealand and there is a need to demonstrate that these results can be reproduced in other locations and cultures. As a professional development experience the current results are positive however the study did not demonstrate that the coaches involved actually made behavioural improvements in their coaching or that clients felt that coaches trained in this way were more effective than coaches trained in more traditional method such as classroom training.

From a practical standpoint, our research suggests that group-based reflective practice sessions may be a useful adjunct to traditional classroom or virtual coaching skills training. The key advantage of reflective practice-based learning is that its experiential nature appeals to adult learners who typically can see both the relevance and the implications of the learning. Coaches rarely have the opportunity to see live coaching sessions in action so the group reflective practice approach offers multiple examples of this.

In conclusion, the highly experiential approach generated in group-reflective practice sessions appears to be a useful adjunct to traditional classroom or virtual training methods.

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