

Making most of the spectrum of mentoring and coaching in education

This is an edited transcript of the dialogue keynote speech given at the first CollectivED Knowledge Exchange on the 4th July 2019

Professor Rachel Lofthouse and Professor C J van Nieuwerburgh

RL Christian and I are going to share some thoughts about making the most of coaching and mentoring and recognising it as a spectrum. It is unrehearsed, but we do have some questions that we will discuss.

CJN When we were planning this keynote, we thought how interesting it might be to have a dialogue. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this question *Why do you describe coaching and mentoring as being on a spectrum?*

RL Most of us would probably think about coaching and mentoring as on a spectrum and there's obviously a relationship between them. One of the interesting things is that we tend to wrap the two terms together but we may well mean different things. For some of us, the use of the word 'and' in the term 'coaching and mentoring' suggests that these are very similar processes and relatively interchangeable in their form and characteristics. For others, the use of the word 'and' differentiates between the two. Some of us use both terms in both ways and at different times and in different contexts, and maybe haven't even thought about it that hard.

Some of you here today will be particularly experienced in mentoring, particularly novice teachers, trainee teachers. At some point in the past, we will all have been mentored and it has allowed us access to a profession and it has kept us in the game. Many of us see ourselves as mentors, whether that is by designation, by role, by responsibility or by stance, or tendency, working alongside other people and thinking about how we can

support them, help them and enable them to do the very best work they can.

In our English education context, we tend to use mentors as 'gatekeepers'. Mentors are part of the process of training, and the process of judgement. They help us understand which of our new teachers are capable of joining the profession by meeting a set of standards. The mentor plays quite a key role in that.

But, mentoring is a diverse practice, as is coaching and we get ourselves into all sorts of interesting arguments and discussions about what we actually mean when we say coaching. Many of us will have had an opportunity to train, or to read or experience a particular model of coaching and this means we are very inclusive in our use of the word coaching, but sometimes we may lose definition.

We could spend a lot of time unpacking the spectrum but for me it is an important starting point to recognise that a spectrum suggests all sorts of variability, all sorts of connections and relationships, but also an opportunity to be distinguishing and distinct about what we are doing. A spectrum is made up of individual colours, and that's not to say that we nail our colour to the mast and say that is *my* definitive model but at a particular point in time we know the colour of our work when we do it well. So that is partly what I mean when I talk about a spectrum.

RL *Coaching is a buzz word in education, but it seems to mean different things to different people. How do you view it?*

CJN Is coaching a buzz word? Yes, I think it is. I've been fascinated by coaching in education for a little while and I've noticed the word is in use more. I have this view that something really amazing is happening – people are talking about it, it's part of the conversation, it is being used more and more, so on the one hand I'm very excited that we're all using the same language. The downside to it being a buzz word is that it might begin to sound like a fad. Maybe the word itself is going to be a fad, but the idea of educators having quality conversations with each other about encouraging others, their well-being, that is here to stay. The other downside is I have spoken to schools where people are saying they want some of that 'coaching thing' and my worry is that we just waltz into it without a clear understanding of what it actually is.

What is it that you would like to be different? If coaching is the answer, what is the question? It's so important to know why you are doing coaching: maybe the question is 'How can we engage and empower our people?' Or it might be 'How do we improve the well-being of our people?' Or the question might be 'How do I connect better with the community?' I don't like the checklist mentality that says we should do coaching because everyone else is. The worst thing for me to hear is 'Oh, we did coaching. It didn't work'. Also, there's a risk that we get too evangelical about it, that we think coaching is the answer to everything. It is our collective responsibility to make sure we are using coaching in a way that is most impactful.

A group of us worked together to bring some sense to the coaching spectrum – we call it 'helping conversations'. We wanted to bring together a common language about the different approaches to coaching:

Three Conversational Approaches to Helping in Education

	Facilitative	Dialogical	Directive
Metaphor	Facilitator	Partner	Expert-apprentice
Teacher knowledge	Knows what they need to improve	Has valuable knowledge but may need other knowledge to improve	Must implement new knowledge to improve
Decision-maker	Teacher	Teacher	Expert
Approach	Sets aside expertise	Shares expertise dialogically	Shares knowledge directly
Mode of discourse	Inquiry	Balances advocacy with inquiry	Advocacy

van Nieuwerburgh, Knight & Campbell (2019)

There are facilitative approaches to coaching, where the metaphor is the coach as the facilitator. The coach believes the teacher already knows what s/he needs to do to improve. That then allows the coach to set aside their expertise intentionally in the service of the person with whom they are working. The model is one of inquiry, working on it together.

The dialogic approach to coaching is not often discussed in the UK, yet it is a tried and tested method. What is important here is Jim Knight's 'partnership principles' between the coach and the coachee, whereby the coach *does* share their expertise as a suggested way of working for the coachee. Both are contributing knowledge, both are asking questions to elicit the best approach.

Directive coaching, whilst still a positive intervention, does involve knowledge exchange and is much more like the mentoring process. The grid of course does not include all coaching approaches, or the complete spectrum, it just focuses on the ones we are most interested in.

So, Rachel, *Is mentoring more important than coaching for new teachers?*

RL When do we support our new teachers with behaviour management, planning? How do we help our new teachers 'become', rather than just expect them to 'be'? We are really struggling to recruit and retain new teachers. There are many reasons for that, and we cannot lay the blame solely at the school door, or the DfE's. This generation of new teachers is younger, desperate to pay off their student debt, often still living at home, and it feels almost as though they have not yet had to become adults. That is not to say they should not be there, but when I was a new teacher, I had been living two hundred miles away from home for the last four years, I was doing my own washing, my own cooking, cleaning, I timetabled everything and actually,

I felt like an adult and made adult decisions. That doesn't mean I always made the right ones, but walking into school as an adult felt perfectly natural.

I think we have different generational expectations coming through, so we have to be very careful about what we offer. Mentoring is very important because it says to the mentee, I have your back, I'm on your side. I can offer you expertise, guidance. But, it can also be dangerous, especially if the mentor feels as though they have to be perfect, and so desperate to help that they have to make all the decisions. That doesn't help anybody grow and flourish.

So, I would say mentoring is critical and essential, but I don't think it is easy. I would also say that coaching is critical. One of our jobs as mentors in that early career stage is to help new teachers start to find themselves, to imagine the future so that they become committed to the education sector, so that they can play a major part in it. It is really critical that we have those conversations which allow them to develop not just in the here and now, but help them think about their future through formative and imaginative conversations.

So, Christian *Are we just saying that teachers need to talk more or does the nature of the conversation matter?*

CJN The real question here is about the quality of the conversation. What we bring from the fields of coaching and mentoring is that we help people to have better conversations. Those conversations help us to be of better service to others, especially if you're a newly qualified teacher, you're just into the profession, hopefully you are there because you too want to be of service, you want to make a difference. For me, coaching and mentoring is about improving the quality of conversations in schools. If a school were to ask me what would be different if we did

coaching; that would be my answer: the *quality* of the conversations.

From the research point of view, it looks like coaching is having a positive impact on well-being, helping people to achieve their goals better, making people more aspirational, and my niggling doubt is this: is it the coaching that is doing this or is it that there is simply more talking? Could it be that someone is taking an interest in them? That people feel valued, heard, appreciated?

So, Rachel *What do we know about how to sustain coaching and mentoring in educational settings?*

RL The first thing to say is it can be a challenge. The main challenge is lack of time and it is the first thing that goes in the life of a busy school. We also have a challenge around workload and the demands on a teacher's time. Until this is fully acknowledged, we won't make any great strides culturally – how do we view the nature of the work that we do as educators, the time that we spend doing all those different things and the way that we work together as a community in the time that we have? *That* is our greatest challenge. The real way we can sustain this is from the ground upwards – we are used to new ideas coming at us left, right and centre, but the majority of them do not fulfil their potential. We all play a part in creating that landscape; all of our interactions that we have, whether with a new teacher, a school leader, a governor, a parent, can help create an understanding of what we can shift in teaching and learning, and the quality of relationships with each other. This is based on trust, and an acceptance to approach things differently when stuck for new ideas. It is the quality of relationships that will sustain coaching and mentoring.

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