# The Problem of Competence in Coaching

(Based on a contribution to the *Sage Coaching Handbook* for publication in 2016)

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Discourses are employed in order to shape social contexts.  Coaching, located within a business context, is influenced by that context and the main discourse of business management is the 'rational pragmatic' (Garvey & Williamson, 2002).  This means that certain ways of thinking and behaving are valued and others are not. For example, the management discourse values a reductionist perspective and is concerned with simplification of the complex and the celebration of the practical.

It is often argued that coaching is radically under theorised (Brunner, 1998; Garvey 2011).  Clearly this is not a problem for the 'rational pragmatic' manager because theory is devalued in the managerial discourse as practicality is elevated. However, according to Lewin (1951:169) "there is nothing as practical as a good theory".  Therefore, whether managers like it or not, there is always a theory behind a discourse.

While there is no single theory that is unique to coaching it is possible to examine the idea of learning theory in relation to coaching. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that learning happens in the 'zone of proximal development'.  This is basically by 'hanging around' with another person and engaging in discussion. Therefore learning is a social activity and not a solo performance and coaching is positioned here as a key social activity.

However, in many organisational contexts what constitutes learning is dominated by the rational pragmatic discourse and this creates a particular model of learning, which in turn leads to a model of assessment. Enter competence frameworks, the preferred model of coaching assessment by many professional bodies.

These frameworks specify 'what' should be learned and they construct pre-specified codes, often positioned as learning outcomes or objectives.  Then the learner is taught these and tested to see if they have learned it. This  'technicists' approach to learning is one that we have become so used to that we no longer notice it; it has become a dominating discourse with an overwhelming rationality and practicality.

The problem with the 'technicist' approach is that we simply learn what is pre-specified and then feel that we have 'arrived' and developed 'expertise' or competence.  This approach ignores 'how' we learn, which is curious given that learning is a key argument in coaching.

The 'how' of learning is a process based approach and is associated with the idea of 'practical judgment' (Harrison & Smith, 2001) or 'reflective skills learning' (Jarvis, 1992; Schon 1983). Practical judgment has its roots in Aristotle's ideas.

Aristotle presents two notions, one he refers to as 'phronesis' and the other 'techne'.

'Techne' is akin to the modern world's understanding of scientific thinking and behaviour.

'Phronesis' is linked to the idea of 'noticing' or attentiveness to a specific situation.  It involves flexibility of thought, sensitivity of context, an orientation to the subject and critical interpretation rather than 'mastery'.

'Techne' is about pre-planned learning whereas 'phronesis' 'is exercised in the course of what might be called 'hot action'. It happens in the moment as an activity.  Rather like when a coach is working.

However, the dominant approach of competencies in coach training emphasises 'techne' at the expense of 'phronesis'.  This is a problem.

The coaching professionalization agenda has become dominated 'techne' through standards, competence frameworks and alleged quality assurance.  The rational pragmatic discourses have become so loud, so dominant that any alternative is squeezed out, marginalized or simply ignored.

This is a very big problem for coaching practice where the literature almost to a writer makes big claims for coaching in terms of its ability to develop individualism, creative and innovative thought, change and the tolerance of complexity – to mention a few commonly cited benefits.

**The ranking problem**

One problem with 'techne' is 'ranking' i.e. novice coach, master coach, supervisor coach.

Is this appropriate for a practice like coaching?

Clearly there is a very conventional logic to ranking; however, this is an 'exclusive' and not an 'inclusive' approach; some will drop out or be damaged by this approach. Of course, if one subscribes to the rational pragmatic discourse, this may not be such a bad thing!  In a Darwinian survival of the fittest world this would be an acceptable loss in the interests of 'standards'.

However, the often cited current discourses of coaching, which favour a person centred humanistic approach (see Cox et al 2014; Garvey et al, 2014; du Toit, 2014; Rogers, 2012; Connor & Pokora, 2012; Western, 2012; Garvey, 2011; Parsloe & Leedham, 2009; Whitmore, 2009; Rosinski, 2004) are clearly at odds with the 'ranking' philosophy employed by professional bodies.

**The instructor-led problem**

Another problem of the 'techne' approach is that the education system for coaches is instructor-led. This may seem an odd criticism. However, it assumes that the instructor has the knowledge and the experience and the learner learns it! The learner is 'taught' and the instructor teaches to the 'standards' set by the assessment or accreditation process.

Again this is at odds with the professed philosophy of coaching which is dominated by the discourse of the 'learner's agenda' (see Cox et al 2014; Garvey et al, 2014; du Toit, 2014; Rogers, 2012; Connor & Pokora, 2012; Western, 2012; Garvey, 2011; Parsloe & Leedham, 2009; Whitmore, 2009; Rosinski, 2004).  However, the 'techne' discourse positions the coach as an 'expert' and so 'instructor-led' is clearly acceptable in a world dominated by the 'techne' discourse.

**The techne vs phronesis problem**

Additionally, there is a problem with the relationship between 'Techne' and 'Phronesis'.  Schön (1987:3) provides some help here in the following quote:

> "On the high ground, management problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy confusing problems defy technical solution.  The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high

ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however, great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern."

Coaching is complex. It is varied in its application and is employed in a range of contexts. Its potential for doing 'good' and making a positive difference to people is huge. It is therefore, quite firmly in the 'swampy lowlands' where 'techne' doesn't help.


'Techne' makes it easier to judge if outcomes or objectives are met.

'Techne' treats learning as a 'linear' activity (Garvey et al, 2014) where the learner moves in a straight line rather like moving along a road or up a staircase and the 'techne' discourse is attractive; if we know the precise route then the logic dictates that most helpful thing we can do is accelerate their journey and get a pre-specified destination as quickly as possible.

Some human progress happens in this way but this is only a fraction of human capability. Yes, this approach enhances accountability and quality control (the arguments of professional bodies in coaching) but it is also limited in that it may get us to where we want to go by the fastest and most direct route but it "cannot develop our awareness of the different kinds of destination available, the speed of travel or the choice of route, nor does it hold out any promise that we will be enriched simply by the travelling" (Garvey et al, 2014:113). It does not develop the essential quality of 'phronesis' so needed by a coach.

The holders of the 'techne' i.e. the competence framework, have power over the assessment and accreditation system. This probably means that 'phronesis' is discounted. As Barnett (1994:37) states "genuinely interactive and collaborative forms of reasoning" (phronesis) are being driven out by 'techne' and as a result, we are not developing coaches capable of the very qualities we hope that coaching will help develop.

**The standards problem**

A further problem with competence led assessment is the issue of standards. Garvey et al (2014:220) ask "Do standards raise standards?" A very important paradoxical question with a serious underbelly! Could standards simply mean that trainers or educators work to the minimum and therefore 'standards' reduce standards? Would you like to be coached by a coach who achieved a minimum pass on standards framework?

Where are special abilities or creativity considered in a competence model other than through a hierarchy of standards posited as 'novice' to 'advanced'? This approach provides a 'blanket' approach to coach development where specific talents or contexts of practice are ignored in favour of standards. In itself this limits the scope of a list of standards, unless they are particularly comprehensive but comprehensiveness is not associated with the rational pragmatic discourse – the discourse that dominates the business world. Instead, it favours reductionism – simplicity.

However, Garvey et al (2009:191) note: ".....when professionals are highly anxious ...........under strong resource pressure, then the delivery of competencies can degrade." More worryingly, Barnett (1994:73) comments that: "the notion of competence is concerned with predictable behaviours in predicable situations".

This is a seriously concerning observation for those involved in coaching. How often is a coaching conversation predictable? The competence qualified coach might think – 'mostly!' because this is the rational pragmatic discourse. The competence qualified coach might believe the quote (often attributed to Abraham Maslow): "if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail"!

**The stability problem**

Competency frameworks developed out of rational pragmatic discourses also assume stability. This is a problem when most coaching situations are fluid and based on change and transition. The competence model for coach development is therefore weak.

**More problems**

Further criticisms of competence frameworks are offered by the Bolden & Gosling (2006:148) analysis of the literature on the subject. They present five arguments found in the literature as to why competencies are inadequate.

- Ecclestone, (1997); Grugulis, (1998) and Lester, (1994) all state that the reductionist nature of competencies make them inadequate to deal with the complexities of a job role;

- Grugulis, (2000); Loan-Clarke, (1996) and Swailes & Roodhouse, (2003) argue that the generic nature of competencies mean that they are not sensitive to specific situations, tasks or individuals;

- Cullen, (1992) and Lester, (1994) argue that competence frameworks represent a view of past performance rather than act as a predictor of future behaviour;

- Bell et al., 2002) suggest that competence frameworks exclude subtle qualities, interactions and situational factors

- Brundrett, (2000) argues that they create a limited and mechanistic approach to learning.

These arguments could easily be applied to coach training based on competence standards and the current direction of coach education, training, assessment and accreditation is worrying because it simply reflects the rational pragmatic discourse found in organisations. In relation to assessment and accreditation, it is the credentializers who have the power to include or exclude. Currently, excluding seems the norm.

**It could be different**

Many argue that coaching has its roots in a person centred humanism philosophy. This central tenant of person centred humanism is about an ethical and democratic way of being. It is about individuals having the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It recognises the human potential to act in an ethical way to build a more humane society through a sense of free inquiry and the infinite capacity for people to learn and develop. It is an inclusive philosophy and deeply challenging to operationalise.

Of course, exclusivity is easier!

So what is an alternative to assessment and accreditation as positioned by the current power holders?

One way forward is to return to the underpinning values of humanism, recognise that 'techne' does not hold all the answers and 'phronesis' needs to be involved.  This would mean that assessment and accreditation become dynamic, situational and peer led.  Clearly this would also require changes in the way coaches are developed and supported in their development. Here, critical reflection would be necessary and critical reflexivity essential. A coach would not 'arrive' when 'passing' but would be developing a way of life and a way of relating.  Assessment would therefore be continuous, embedded in practice and peer lead.

Are we ready for that or are the dominate voices just too dominant?  Time will tell.

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