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# GROW@BU Coaching Tools

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## **Problems<sup>1</sup> cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them (Einstein, attributed)**

### **1. Introduction**

Coaching is part of the GROW@BU offer, underpinning the educational approach of academics and indeed all staff. Coaching is part of a suite of approaches to student learning. No single approach will be either appropriate or sufficient for any individual, much less for all students in all circumstances. All staff who work with students will have a toolbox of approaches to use when appropriate for the student and the context. Coaching is most appropriate when learning to solve the problem will offer as much learning as the solution itself. A review of the literature pertaining to the use of coaching tools with undergraduate students can be found in the GROW@BU toolkit.

Coaching is often seen as an exclusively one-to-one process and one which requires a lot of time. However, coaching techniques and tools can also be used with groups or in brief informal conversations. Familiarity with tools and techniques will enable you to adapt them to your own specific circumstances, including using coaching techniques with seminar or lecture groups.

As you read on you may recognise some of the techniques as ones you already use in your work with students. Useful questions to keep in mind are:

- Where do you use coaching behaviours with students?
- Where else could you use them?

Coaching assumes that:

- Solving a problem is part of learning, and will build capacity to solve similar problems in the future.
- Students can solve problems which might be beyond them on their own, when in the supportive present of an experienced adult or more competent peer.
- Breaking the problem down into parts is part of the solution.

Learning to coach and to be coached is a useful life skill. It builds resilience, so that students have the confidence that they will be able to solve any problem that may arise. In encouraging students

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, terms such as 'problem' do not indicate a negative concept, but just something on the list of things needing to be solved. Solving problems is what we do on a daily basis as a fundamental aspect of living.

to seek out the best person to support them with a given issue, coaching helps them to develop a strong support network. During placements or their first work role students may encounter a line-manager using a coaching approach, where the student is expected to propose possible solutions to problems, rather than identify the problem and await instructions.

Those who wish to be involved in coaching will need to understand how to ask questions to help someone else reach a goal; what kinds of questions work best; the role of the person being the coach; and the role of the person being the coachee.

### **2. The Coaching Conversation**

The most common model used for a coaching conversation is the GROW model. This comes from research into the work of successful coaches, where the stages of the conversation were identified.

These stages are:

- Goal – where do you want to get to?
- Reality – what is your current position?
- Options – What could you do?
- Will – What will you do?

A sample script for a GROW session is provided in the GROW@BU toolkit.

People new to coaching often think they need to be an expert in the problem under discussion before they can coach a person. In truth, the case is almost the reverse: the expertise needs to be in coaching itself rather than in the issue being presented. You can test this for yourself by coaching someone when you do not even know what problem is being presented: through 'silent coaching'. This is an exercise which is often used with new coaches, but the technique could be adapted when you want to work with a large group on a common issue such as learning to work with feedback.

To try 'silent coaching', use the sample GROW script above in either or both of these ways:

- Getting someone else to ask you the questions, while you write down your answers. You will need to start with an issue you want to work on (a current dilemma, an ambition, a rising problem) that is neither too large (the meaning of life) nor too small (what colour to paint my house). You do not need to share the problem in advance or even afterwards.
- Asking the questions of someone else while they write down their answers.

What did you and your colleague gain from this experience? Which questions most affected your thinking? The next sections assume you have used the GROW model coaching script for silent coaching for yourself and for at least one other person.

### 3. Understanding Coaching Questions

These experiences should show that you do not even need to know what the issue is in order to help someone reach a useful conclusion. While with experience you can learn to self-coach by running through these issues in your head, Vygotsky<sup>2</sup> (1986) suggests that speech (and thus writing) differ from thought in demanding a sequential structure in language. This means that spoken or written language will expose gaps or contradictions where thought may not. So writing or speaking the answers is a key part of the process.

Looking back at the questions in this script, you will notice that they all start with interrogatives. These Who, What, How, When, Where questions leave the responsibility with the student. Asking questions which start with verbs (Do you think...? Could you try...?) take the responsibility back to the coach. A key tenet of a coaching approach is to leave responsibility with the student, so they reach their best solution. Their best solution may be different from what yours would be, but unless they own the solution they will not take it forward. The sixth interrogative, Why? should be used with care as it can drift into accountability. It is also worth looking again at each question in the GROW script to understand what each one did for you and how it can work for the student.

After a couple of experiences of 'silent coaching' then it is useful to move on to the more usual version where the person you are coaching answers your questions aloud. While as a coach you should still use the GROW model as a framework you will now need to develop your own questions to respond to what you have heard.

At the beginning it can be very difficult to stay with the interrogatives and avoid the verbs and the suggestions. If you think your student is missing an obvious point, then it is fine to ask permission to offer it: I have another idea, would you like to hear it? But before this, make sure you have given them plenty of opportunity to suggest ideas for themselves. The question 'What else?' can be invaluable when helping others develop ideas. It almost invariably produces something more and it can be used several times until the student says they have reached the end of their ideas.

A good coaching conversation relies too on someone who is or can become a good coachee. The qualities of a good coachee include: being honest with yourself; being creative about options; and

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<sup>2</sup> VYGOTSKY, L. S. (1986) *Thought and language*, London: MIT.

being realistic about actions. A good coachee will understand the value of getting and understanding feedback, working out how to respond to that feedback, and planning and implementing that plan.

### 4. Starting a Coaching Conversation

When you start a coaching conversation, however brief, with a student it helps if you are both clear about what they want from the conversation. So it can help to start with two questions such as:

- What do you want to achieve in our conversation today?
- How will you know that you have achieved it?

It can also save time if you know how far the student has travelled in seeking an answer, and useful questions include:

- What have you tried so far?
- What has been the result?
- What else could you try?

### 5. Coaching Behaviours

When working with students in coaching mode, there are some specific behaviours that can help you to stay in coaching mode:

- **Believing:** do you believe that the student can work out the solution to their issue, given some attention and support? Helping a student believe that they can solve their own problems creates a vital life skill for the future. Giving them the answer helps create dependency for the future, meaning that they will return frequently so you can solve their problems.
- **Listening:** are you giving your full attention to what the student is saying to you? This can mean thinking beyond the words, listening to what lies behind the surface meaning, and carefully observing body language. The apparent problem can present the surface of a more fundamental issue. If you can help the student recognise and solve the fundamental issue then you will have helped create a more independent learner for the future.
- **Questioning:** asking questions that start with interrogatives (who? when? how? where? what? and sometimes why?) means that you are more likely to help the student draw on their own resources and less likely to offer your own single solution that may not suit them.
- **Reflecting:** this involves checking that you are hearing what they intend you to hear. 'As I understand it you are saying that...?' This can help you both focus on the real issue and avoid the wasted time which can follow even a slight misunderstanding. Also hearing the issue in someone else's words can offer a new perspective.

- Reframing: this helps students see their problem from a different angle. 'What would a neutral person say? If you knew someone who had solved this problem really well, what would they say?'
- Challenge and support: the role of the staff member as coach is twin, offering both challenge and support. This entails the belief that the student can solve the problem, alongside the questioning to enable this to happen. The two together help the student build the resilience to solve problems with increasing independence.

### 6. Developing as a Coach

There are a number of techniques that you can adopt to help develop your coaching skills.

#### Coaching triads

If you want to improve how you use coaching questions and approaches with students, it can help to work with others in coaching triads. Here you take it in turns to be the coach, the student, and the observer. Thus you have the opportunity to see how another coach approaches an issue and a student, and to get feedback on your own approach.

First you need to agree who will take each role, and who will monitor time. Allow about 15-20 minutes for each session. Each role has its own rules which are essential to make the process work effectively for everybody. The Student should:

- Choose a real issue
- Be prepared to engage with it fully
- Be aware of choosing the issue partly so the Coach will gain some learning.

The Coach should:

- Treat this as a real coaching session,
- Be aware of time constraints
- Think about what you want to work on and let both Student and Observer know.
- Be brave and try something new: this is your chance to experiment.
- Remember to keep to time and thank the other participants.
- When you receive feedback resist the temptation to apologise or explain: instead think about how you will make use of the perspective of others.

The Observer should:

- Offer feedback to the coach so attention should be on the coach.
- Write down things which seem effective to you in the session.
- In feedback start and finish with a positive comment and include two, or at most three, ideas for the future. Phrase these as positively as you can.

- Constructive feedback can be expressed by saying such things as: I noticed that you ..... and this seemed to help the Student in this way.... If I were to focus on one area for improvement it would be.....

The Student too may have something useful to add, so leave time for this. While the Observer might have taken the session in a different direction, or may have ideas to offer the student, this would need to be discussed by agreement and in a separate space.

### **The reflective space**

Coaches can also benefit from keeping a brief written note of how they work using an action learning framework such as:

- What did I do?
- What went well?
- What could I have done differently?
- What will I do differently in future?

Further guidance and a template can be found in the GROW@BU toolkit.

### **Self-coaching**

So, to build on the questions we considered earlier, you could use some of these questions for self-coaching:

- Where do you use coaching behaviours with students?
- Where else could you use them?
- Where will you use them next? Be specific.
- How could you enable students to use coaching skills with their peers?
- What else do you need to change to enable these things to happen?
- What will be your first step?

## **7. The Useful Questions**

During the pilot phase of the GROW@BU project, staff identified a number of typical scenarios in which coaching techniques could be applied to help students develop independence in their own problem solving skills. With the help of a coaching advisor, a series of questions, specific to that scenario were developed. The following scripts have been developed and included in the GROW@BU toolkit;

- Getting the most out of lectures
- Meeting deadlines
- Time management
- Working in groups



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- Finding a placement
- Getting the best from feedback
- Making notes
- Interaction problems with students
- Failing units
- Intention to leave

Learning to coach as a permanent aspect of interaction with students is an interesting journey. Good coaches constantly reflect on their own practice, seeking to improve it. These three sets of five questions will help you decide whether your conversation should be based in coaching, and then help you structure the conversation, and finally pick up any learning points for yourself. Refer to them regularly as you begin to focus on coaching, and you will quickly incorporate them into a natural process of self-review.

### **Five questions for staff to use for their own reflection– Three times for luck!**

When a student approaches you: is this a coaching conversation?

- What is the presenting issue?
- What is the real issue?
- What is the growth point?
- What is my minimum initial intervention?
- What will be the student's gain in independence from this conversation?

During the coaching conversation: elements of the GROW model

- What do you want to achieve in this conversation?
- What have you tried so far?
- What else could you try?
- What is the first thing you could do?
- When will you do it?

After the conversation: reflecting to improve your own practice:

- How did I listen so I could understand the text and any sub-text of the student's issue?
- How did the student know that I had confidence in them to resolve this issue?
- What different sorts of questions did I use to help them think through their issue?

- How did my questions help them achieve a different perspective on the issue?
- What made me believe that they will take the first step to resolve this issue?

Coaching and reflection draw on Kolb's experiential learning cycle used iteratively: What did I do? What went well? What might I have done differently? What will I do differently next time?

### **8. Conclusion**

Having read this paper and tried out the coaching exercises, you have taken the first steps to developing your practice with students. So, use the techniques now for some self-coaching to take you to the next stage:

- What do you want to achieve with students, where a coaching approach might help?
- How are you currently working?
- What else could you do?
- What would you need to do to make that change?
- What will be your first step, and when?

If you want to find out more about anything in this pack or to provide feedback on the tools please contact the GROW@BU team on [grow@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:grow@bournemouth.ac.uk)