

*Coaching and Mentoring - Theory and Practice*

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*Coach, mentor, supervisor* and *tutor* are all terms, used in different times and in various contexts, to indicate relationships and activities of support, guidance and professional development, relevant to work and career. "Holding up the mirror", "Thinking over" and "Modelling" have always been the basic principles, explored and debated, in the enormous variety of literature on the question of coaching and mentoring. So, what does this book *Coaching and Mentoring - Theory and Practice*, add to the great wealth of essays and studies on this topic?

Actually, the book was first published in 2009, was reprinted every year till 2017, and in 2018 the third edition was updated with new research and development in practice: there is interest in the different forms of coaching and mentoring across all sectors of society around the globe. So, in this worldly context the book has these strengths:

- every theoretical or methodological section is linked to *Reflective Questions*, in which the issues are presented with a critical view in the light of personal experiences and ideas;
- there is a great variety of case studies through which specific experiences are reported and reflected upon;
- sound and well-grounded references to literature (many scholars from different periods) are mixed with a wide range of quotations.

Part 1, Chapter 1, starts with the historical development of coaching and mentoring, and relates it to a contemporary view. The notion of mentoring dates back to 3,000 years ago in Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, (mentor as an advisor of thought), passes through the 18th century (Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, Caraccioli's *Le véritable mentor ou L'éducation de la noblesse*, references in Byron's poems and Honoria's *The Female Mentor* in 1793, in which a female mentor, Amanda, provides instruction to a group of women referred to as "the society"), and is dealt with in modern literature. Also coaching has an historical outline: the Socratic dialogue in ancient Greece had four indispensable components that made it the "ancestor" of coaching: *concrete experience, full understanding between participants, adherence to a subsidiary question until it is answered, striving for consensus* (pp. 12-13). In modern literature coaching and mentoring are seen as similar, carrying out shared purposes, even though there is a core difference: *mentoring is often a voluntary activity, while coaching is often paid [...] coaching research tends to focus on outcomes and return-on-investment calculations, mentoring research tends to look at the functional issues.* (p. 19)

In the following chapters – from 2 to 6 – there are various issues dealt with: from the necessity of setting up a coaching and mentoring organization, not just relying on individuals but on a wider and recognized system, to creating a new kind of culture and a set of values. Schemes of design and models of evaluation are presented, as well as the possibility of carrying out an "open curriculum", *which places the learner in control and encourages challenge, questioning, high initiative, innovation and creativity, while a closed curriculum is associated with managerial control and is driven so strongly by assessment and evaluation* (p. 78). Besides, there may be different approaches to coaching: *cognitive, based on cognitive behavioural therapy; gestalt, focusing on the exploration of the here and now; narrative, using client stories; positive psychology, working with client strength, promoting growth and learning* (p.85). Also conversations between the mentor and the mentee are reported to identify their different purposes and illustrate *non-linear learning. A conversation starts in a "social" way and moves through "tactical", "technical" and "strategic" quite quickly. Prompted by his new role, the mentee revisits issues he has addressed before. [...] He states explicitly that he didn't know at the outset where the conversation would go but it has been productive, leading to insight, clarification and a commitment to action* (p. 120).

In Part 2 the power dynamics in the relationship between the mentor and the mentee appears particularly significant: in a clear map the effects of “transference and countertransference” in the mentor-mentee relationship is well illustrated, with its positive and negative aspects: on behalf of the mentee *respect vs being overawed; assertion of personal identity vs sucking the mentor dry*; on behalf of the mentor *benevolence vs making the mentee stay overawed; letting go of the client vs victimizing the mentee* (p.129). Further on, e-development is debated as it has more and more part in most coaching and mentoring activities; there can be three broad archetypes of it:

1. *pure e-development: all aspects of the coaching/mentoring are done using electronic means;*
2. *primary e-development: the majority of the coaching/mentoring activity is done using electronic media but interspersed with some face-to-face meetings;*
3. *supplementary e-development: employing electronic media is seen as a useful add-on, but it is not central to the scheme or process* (p.187).

Also the advantages in practicing e-development are pointed out: i.e. *breaking down geographical barriers and time pressure, diminishing visual status clues – ethnicity, gender, age –, what is said is captured, recorded and can be referred back*, as well as the disadvantages: i.e. *relationships are easy to make and to break, removal of context can make it more difficult to pick up on what is not being said/shared, it is easier to develop unrealistic relationships, experiential learning can be more difficult* (p. 188).

Getting deeper and deeper into coaching and mentoring activities in Part 3 and 4 other meaningful issues are examined such as the notion of supervision and its implications, diversity, the question of ethics, competencies and standards. In particular, coaching and mentoring offer an opportunity for individuals to explore the concepts of tolerance and acceptance through three main approaches: 1. *Emergent and episodic: facilitating diversity training aimed at sensitizing organizational members towards better communication and awareness of difference*; 2. *Programmatic: creating an organizational development approach to diversity against any standardized recruitment and selection processes*; 3. *Strategic multiculturalist: seeking social integration and cohesion for long-term strategic progression in the light of the positive philosophy of multiculturalism* (pp.231-33).

As concerns competencies and standards arguments for and against them are presented: is the standardization of coaching/mentoring practice good or not? The question has no definite answer but certainly standards seem to be the basis for a higher and higher proportion of qualifications and curricula throughout the western world. In this perspective, *competencies can be used as a way of describing the role of a coach or mentor, standards could (or should?) be built on a competency framework, some kind of order is advocated for mentoring and coaching communities, but be careful of the risk inherent in Tayloristic “one-best way” practices* (pp.272-3).

Finally the last chapter, *Towards a meta-theory of coaching and mentoring*, provides a clear summative map of all the areas and relationships so far examined, and concludes with *Future Direction*, in which on the one hand it is claimed *there is not one way forward for all coaching and mentoring*, and on the other it is advocated that *the ultimate future of the activity rests in the hands of its practitioners* (p. 307).

This statement and wish can be strongly shared inside the European context and more particularly in the Italian situation, where projects for students’ school-work experiences have been very much practiced in the last few years, and initial teacher training for primary education relies on good coaching/mentoring activities. Even though today for lower and upper secondary education teachers’ selection is made through a national exam, forms of training at school are fundamental, and that is why coaching and mentoring have to be valued and developed for any educational purpose.

In this sense, the book *Coaching and Mentoring* is really precious: a wide and wonderful guide for a better way of working and teaching!

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