

# Coaching Understood

A pragmatic inquiry into the coaching process

Elaine Cox



# Coaching Understood

# Praise for *Coaching Understood*

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'In *Coaching Understood*, Elaine Cox offers a most extensive, most accessible, holistic examination of theories from across disciplines, to explore and discuss every nuance and aspect of the coaching relationship and task. *Coaching Understood* is full of applications to practice, with examples and coaching excerpts to illustrate, and thus a most comprehensive evidence-based text becomes practical and pragmatic through its easily readable presentation. Refreshingly, concepts such as mindfulness, flow and presence are given attention. This book will leave researchers, coaches and clients wanting to know more, do more and think more about how the coaching process really works.'

*Jan Robertson, Senior Researcher, University of Waikato, New Zealand.  
Senior Associate, New Zealand Coaching and Mentoring Centre*

'In *Coaching Understood*, Dr. Elaine Cox masterfully blends theory, research and pragmatism in the development of her Experiential Coaching Cycle which is a universally applicable coaching framework. Her book is a necessary foundational resource for those with a passion for coaching. It is especially relevant for those who wish to become more effective coaches, and for those who engage in research about coaching. Readers will come to understand coaching as a "communicative learning process" that is uniquely distinct from counseling and mentoring.'

*Andrea D. Ellinger, Ph.D., PHR, Professor of Human Resource Development, The University of Texas at Tyler*

'If you are looking to truly understand the coaching process, this book is for you. Novices, advanced beginners and experts alike will find evidence-based insights into the philosophical and scientific foundations underpinning contemporary coaching practice. Highly recommended.'

*Anthony Grant PhD, Director, Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Sydney*

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# About the Author

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**Dr Elaine Cox** is a principal lecturer and the director of Masters and Doctoral level coaching and mentoring programmes in the Business School at Oxford Brookes University. She holds a Masters degree (with distinction) from the University of Warwick and a PhD from Lancaster University. Elaine is an experienced researcher who has authored many academic papers and book chapters on coaching-related issues. She co-edited *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* and is the co-author of *Goal-focused Coaching* with Yossi Ives. Elaine is also the founding editor of *The International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, an online open access, peer reviewed journal aimed at sharing coaching and mentoring research with a broad, international audience.

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# 1

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# Introduction

## Chapter Aims:

- To introduce a cyclical coaching model that explains the coaching process
- To explain the functions of the different parts of the model, together with the important transition points
- To introduce the chapters of the book

In this book I explain how coaching works. Coaching is a facilitated, dialogic, reflective learning process, and its popularity reflects a need arising in society driven by complex situations and the individual nature of problems affecting people. But, there is a problem with coaching in that, although anecdotally we know it works, it is not clearly defined, and the research underpinning it is notably sparse. Furthermore, it is supported by a collection of loosely aligned interventions and activities, all necessarily adopted from other disciplines, but often without clear justification. Fortunately many of the components of coaching have been researched in their own right, within their own disciplines. Therefore, in this book I work from a pragmatic perspective, drawing extensively on this research in order to provide a comprehensive evidence-based understanding of coaching that will begin to explain its unique power and appeal.

I believe that as coaches we should each adopt a pragmatic approach to our work and our research. We need to recognise theories as important, but also see them as socially constructed ‘truths’ that are open to challenge. Pragmatism is derived from the Greek word *pragma*, meaning action. Pragmatist coaches therefore, take the theories, tools and techniques that they deem useful, employ them in their practice, and then report on their effectiveness, mapping them back to their respective theoretical origins. The pragmatic method insists that truths be ‘tested’ against practice or action. As I have explained elsewhere, I see the pragmatic approach to coaching practice as overcoming many of the flaws in current thinking about coaching:

It justifies an initial eclectic approach, appeases calls for integration, overrides a top-down, single school approach and gets us away from an emphasis on the individual coaches’ values and beliefs. A pragmatic,

empirical position expands the meaning perspectives of the practitioner, takes the emphasis away from the individual as having some core of inner 'truth' and extends human knowledge beyond the personal knowledge of the individual, or the orthodoxy of particular theories, and outwards towards a more comprehensive, socially constructed, theoretical commons that can become a basis for a profession and a professional philosophy that all can build and share. (Cox, 2011: 61)

This then is the philosophy underpinning this book. The model of coaching presented in the book is necessarily pragmatic – it uses cognitive and behavioural science wherever they can best be useful. However, it is also essentially phenomenological and constructivist: it begins with attempts to understand the client's experience, moves through clarification, reflection and critical thinking, which are highly cognitive, and then looks at ways of facilitating the transfer of understanding back into experience. So it goes beyond cognitive change, suggesting that the cycle is not complete until there is actual embodied, physical change as well.

In the book I also present coaching as synonymous with facilitated reflective practice. I describe how coaching begins and ends with the client's experience, whether that is specifically workplace experience or whole life experience, and in between is a complex process of phenomenological reflection augmented by critical thinking. Beginning with clients' attempts to articulate their experiential dilemmas, I particularly want to explain the coaching process through a lens of phenomenological reflection, beginning with how clients' experiences lead to dilemmas that provide grounds for coaching, and ending with the resolution of those particular dilemmas via integration of new learning back into experience.

Although many books mention the importance of reflection, few really place reflective practice at the centre of their coaching universe. One text that does attempt to give a fuller account is Brockbank, McGill and Beech (2002). These authors define reflection as 'an intentional process, where social context and experience are acknowledged, in which learners are active individuals, wholly present, engaging with another, open to challenge, and the outcome involves transformation as well as improvement for both individuals and their organisation' (Brockbank et al., 2002: 6). Later, Brockbank and McGill (2006) focus on reflective dialogue and point out that the idea of reflection as solely an individual activity belongs to the 'rational model of learning that suggests that the cognitive mind alone can solve any problem, sort out any confusion ...' (2006: 53). They further suggest that 'while intrapersonal reflection can be effective and may offer opportunities for deep learning, which may or may not be shared with another, it is ultimately not enough to promote transformative learning' (2006:53). Thus they suggest that for transformation to occur, reflection work must be undertaken with help from other people. The argument here is that, without dialogue, assumptions and unhelpful beliefs are not challenged, and so reflection is limited to the insights of the individual. Thus these authors

identify the special role that ‘intentional dialogue’, such as that initiated by coaching, has in promoting reflection.

## About this Book

In order to structure the book, I introduce a practical and holistic model of the coaching process that shows a progression, beginning with unarticulated experience and moving through various stages of cognitive exploration towards the integration of reformulated understanding that informs future experience. In order to make the structure of this process clearer, I introduce here a new cyclical coaching model (Figure 1.1). The model has spaces and spokes, like a wheel, which are all key stages necessary to help clients transition through the coaching assignment.

Skiffington and Zeus argue that coaching demands ‘a conceptual framework that will provide a common language and a basis for research and create a blueprint for coaching practice and education’ (2003: 29). This book is an answer to that demand. It is also an answer to Jackson’s lament that coaching is not being based on theory: ‘The fast growth of the coaching industry has created structural weaknesses’, he argues, adding that ‘it is never too early to attend to foundations’ (Jackson, 2008: 74). This book then, heeds Jackson’s call and is part of that constructive investigation into the foundations of coaching that is so badly needed. I hope that the book will provide a strong underpinning for coaching so that others may build confidently on its ideas and proposals.

Underneath the frequent calls in the profession for dialogue about the future of coaching lies an inherent lack of understanding about what coaching is and what it can do. Sometimes we have been starting our investigations in the wrong place. I have watched coaching researchers focus on exploring sites of application through numerous case studies and have watched them grasp at attractive theories and models from a range of disciplines, particularly psychotherapy. What I have not seen yet is an explanation of how coaching works or why it works – the fundamental process that underpins all coaching. Furthermore, in a struggle to find an identity, coaching has tried to identify boundaries between itself and counselling or mentoring or training (Bachkirova and Cox, 2005; Lawton-Smith and Cox, 2007). But its identity has also been blurred by adoption of techniques from other fields. By explaining in this book how coaching really works, I uncover fundamental differences that will enable coaching researchers to focus more explicitly on the process of coaching as a distinct area of study.

Coaching is multidisciplinary and there are many established and effective approaches that enable coaches to work in a number of different contrasting or overlapping ways (see Cox et al., 2010, for examples). However, I would argue that a fundamental process underpins all coaching, and it is this process that informs how it differs from other helping approaches such as mentoring and counselling. Thus the book provides a new, holistic and very practical model

that gives clients an understanding of the process, and provides coaches with a framework to guide their practice – and indeed to underpin their own learning and development.

There are lots of books about coaching. They mainly talk about the psychology of coaching, how to do coaching, the coaching process, or the role and benefits of coaching in a variety of different contexts. But an unambiguous extended definition of coaching remains elusive, and the workings of the coaching interaction itself are still a mystery. This book plugs that gap. It makes clear what happens and why it works. It uses theory and examples of coaching dialogue to build an understanding of how all the basic elements present in the coaching interaction (questioning, listening, challenging, reflecting, etc.) work and interact, and thereby exposes the inscrutability that underlies coaching's success as a personal and professional development intervention.

## About Coaching

When clients first come to coaching it is often because their recent experience has driven them there. Something needs to change or improve, or something within their pre-reflective, experiential 'soup' has bubbled through to become conscious. It might be that they have a hunch, a feeling or an intuition that is troubling them. In Mezirow's (1991) terms they may have a disorienting dilemma. The dilemma may have arisen from a sudden feeling that something is not right, or it may be something that has built up in importance over time and one further event has tipped the balance. Either way, they feel that something needs to change and that is what brings them to coaching.

The issues a client may bring to a coach may be feelings of being stuck, feeling as if no progress is being made, frustration that the same thing keeps happening, or a feeling of going back and forth with no apparent resolution. Intuitively, people in these situations feel that they need to make changes or they need support at work to overcome an impasse. They may come to coaching feeling that they are at a point of transition. They often feel they are on the cusp of something, or that something needs to alter, but they are not clear what. The coach then needs to help the client identify the nature of the experience in order ultimately to inform necessary change. Other clients may be clearer about where they want to be in their life, but they still want help getting there.

## The Coaching Cycle

Very many coaches want to work holistically, but do not have access to an evidence base to enable them to do that. The cyclical model described in this book explains an holistic approach that satisfies that need, and, I would argue, actually underpins all coaching. The model has client experience at its core and

takes account of a comprehensive range of theories, including experiential learning, intuition, focusing, phenomenology, critical reflection, rationality and tacit understanding, and also draws on current thinking in neuroscience in order to consider how our thinking and reflective faculties are linked to emotions and brain function.

The Experiential Coaching Cycle (shown in Figure 1.1) has three substantive constituent spaces: Pre-reflective Experience, Reflection on Experience and Post-reflective Thinking. Each space is a hiatus where events occur or reflection happens. The cycle also has three major 'spokes', or transition phases: Touching Experience, Becoming Critical and Integrating. Spokes invariably involve more emotional, cognitive or physical effort than spaces, and are particularly challenging for both coach and client because of the emotional struggle and uncertainty inherent in them. These spaces and transitions are described further below.

In developing this cycle I owe an intellectual debt to Kolb (1984; Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Kolb explained in detail how knowledge results from 'the combination of grasping and transforming experience' (Kolb, 1984: 41). What drives clients to come to coaching are events in their everyday experience, and what they need then at the end of the coaching is to take the enhanced, often transformed, understanding back into their everyday life. In his experiential learning cycle Kolb (1984) identifies an active experimentation phase as well as three other learning phases: concrete experience, reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation. During active experimentation, Kolb suggested, the new understanding, gleaned through earlier phases equips learners to do things differently.

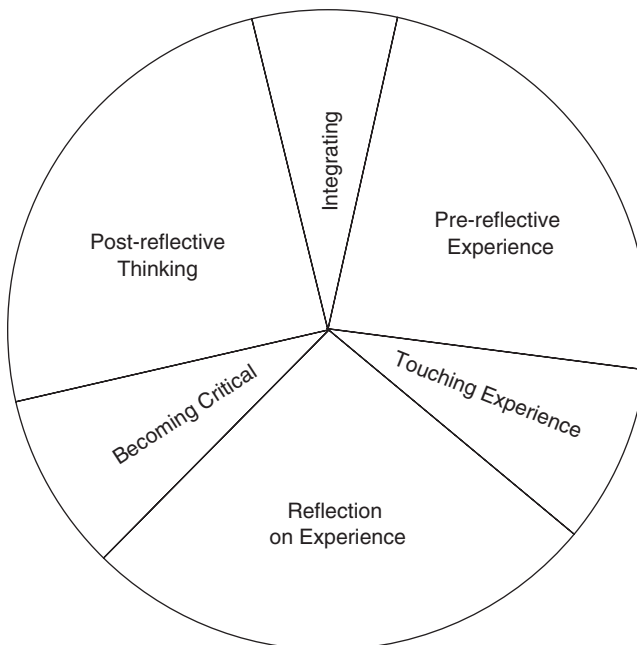


Figure 1.1 The Experiential Coaching Cycle



However, although the Experiential Coaching Cycle owes a debt to Kolb, it differs from that earlier model in its emphasis on the transitions. What is missing from Kolb's learning cycle is a discussion of the transition from one state of being to another. Between his 'bases' of concrete experience and reflective observation, for example, I would argue that there is much uncertainty for the individual; there is transitory activity which necessitates dialogue and support from a coach. The Experiential Coaching Cycle foregrounds those transitory points, or edges, where much learning occurs. Interestingly, Brockbank and McGill (2006: 57) also identify reflective dialogue as engaging clients 'at the edge of their knowledge, sense of self and the world', and other authors that I draw upon in this book, such as Gendlin, Claxton and Fitzgerald talk about 'edges'. In describing the cyclical model, I refer to these edges as spokes because, although they feel edgy, they also have a driving effect, motivating clients and moving them towards understanding, and ultimately transformation. The spaces in between the spokes differ in that they provide the freedom to explore, often involving silence or contemplation.

The three spaces and the three spokes are introduced below, and their nature and their challenges are discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

## The Three Constituent Spaces

The primary constituent space is Pre-reflective Experience, which informs everything the client eventually reflects on and talks about in the coaching. Boyd and Fales (1983: 100) define reflecting as 'the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, *triggered by an experience*, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in and changes conceptual perspective' (my emphasis). Thus, we cannot reflect without an experience to reflect on. However, the fissure between the nature of experience and the language available to describe it are a challenge for coaching.

The second constituent space is Reflection on Experience, which involves deliberation and detailed descriptive articulations of experiences and their associated perceptions and emotions. A variety of theories and models of reflective practice are commonly used for deconstructing and these are discussed in Chapter 6.

The third constituent space, I have called Post-reflective Thinking. As well as thinking which involves logical, cognitive processing, such as metacognitive activity and post-rationalisation, this also encompasses the effectiveness of mindfulness and other embodied practices.

## The Three Spokes

The first transition or spoke is the edge between Pre-reflective Experience and the more conscious Reflection on Experience. I call the dynamic movement

between the two 'Touching Experience' since there is an inarticulate attempt to grasp feelings or intuitions which appear to be buried or submerged. This transition point is a vital stage in the reflection process.

The second spoke comes at the point of 'Becoming Critical' and is the transition from Reflection on Experience to Post-reflective Thinking, encouraged by critical, rational thought that aims to move the client towards a more critical stance. This cusp may be characterised by the transformative awakening that can arise here, particularly through expanding and enhancing the client's perspectives.

The third spoke I call 'Integrating'. It is the final crossing point that heralds the shift of learning from its created cognitive position in the Post-reflective Thinking space to eventual assimilation within ongoing Pre-reflective Experience. It is characterised by testing ideas and making changes. Literature on the transfer of learning informs an understanding of this transition and is discussed in Chapter 10.

## **The Chapters in this Book**

The chapters follow the process implied in the Experiential Coaching Cycle and examine elements of coaching as they inform progression through the cycle. Each chapter includes a comprehensive overview of its subject, drawing on a range of theories, including experiential learning, intuition, focusing, reflective practice, critical reflection, rationality and tacit understanding. The aim is firstly to help with an understanding of how coaching really works, and secondly to provide substance for the cycle as described above, which will give coaches an explanatory framework for their practice where none existed before. The cycle itself may be pertinent to other fields, not only coaching, and has a particular application for practitioners wishing to articulate and develop their own practice. Into it all other models can be poured!

The book also draws on wider theories of education and workplace learning where much has been written about reflective practice, and on current thinking in neuroscience, in order to consider how our thinking and reflective faculties are linked to emotions and brain function.

In order to explain how coaching works in concert with the cycle, each of the chapters examines an element of the coaching interaction, such as Articulating Experience or Reflecting, Listening or Questioning, exploring in depth the specific role of each element in the coaching process and how each works in service of the client at different points in the coaching cycle. The chapters and how they relate to the cycle are set out in Table 1.1.

Nine chapters describe the fundamental elements of the coaching process as informed by the Experiential Coaching Cycle. Each describes a particular coaching activity and how it transports the coaching through a constructivist trajectory, from the purely phenomenological, through the critical and back again to the phenomenological.

Table 1.1 Relationship of chapters to the Experiential Coaching Cycle

Chapter title	Relationship to the Experiential Coaching Cycle
1. Introduction	
2. Touching Experience	Pre-reflective Experience and difficulties of touching and articulating experience
3. Articulating Experience	
4. Listening	
5. Clarifying	
6. Reflecting	Reflection on Experience and the shift from reflection to becoming critical
7. Becoming Critical	
8. Questioning	
9. Being Present	Post-reflective Thinking and the need to integrate learning
10. Integrating Experience	

## Chapter 2. Touching Experience

The problems clients present are rooted in their experience. This chapter describes the first transition in the cycle set out in Figure 1.1. It explains the nature of experience and how difficult it can be for clients to articulate their experiences. Concepts such as focusing are discussed as ways of getting closer to experience.

## Chapter 3. Articulating Experience

This chapter discusses how clients need to construct stories that are congruent with their current conceptions of themselves. These stories are a form of autobiography. The chapter uses theories of narrative meaning making to consider what it is that the coach listens to, and highlights the importance of narrative deconstruction to the coach and the client in achieving a coaching outcome. Clients position themselves in order to narrate a story and this is a natural process, but it is one that the coach also needs to be cautious of.

## Chapter 4. Listening

Chapter 4 focuses on listening, which, since it is what coaches do for a major portion of their time with the client, is one of the most vital elements of coaching to understand. The chapter draws on theories of listening, together with client-centred theories, to look at why listening is important. Theories of levels of listening and types of listening and their implications for the client are examined.

## Chapter 5. Clarifying

This chapter examines clarification techniques as they apply to coaching, and differentiates between the techniques of mirroring and reflecting back. Drawing on translation theory and literary criticism, this chapter also unpacks the role

of clean language in helping the client think, but also looks at the 'dirty language' functions of paraphrasing and summarising as aspects of clarifying.

## **Chapter 6. Reflecting**

This chapter draws on relevant theories and models of reflective practice and introduces two distinct types of reflection – phenomenological reflecting and critical thinking. It examines the concept of phenomenological reflecting in some detail and explores its use in coaching. Reflective practice models that may be useful for promoting phenomenological description are also discussed.

## **Chapter 7. Becoming Critical**

The challenges created by our beliefs and assumptions, and how critical thinking can be encouraged are the topics of this chapter. The chapter focuses initially on how critical thinking is treated in the literature, and then looks at strategies for encouraging criticality and how the coach can begin to challenge the client to think differently.

## **Chapter 8. Questioning**

This chapter examines why questioning is the most powerful element for coaching. Drawing on theories from the learning sciences it looks at the purposes and functions of questioning for the coach and the client. It explores where questions come from and the different types of questioning, including the effectiveness of Socratic questioning and the significance of the 'why' question, which is often held to be out of bounds for the coach.

## **Chapter 9. Being Present**

In this chapter the nature of mindfulness and presence and their role within coaching is examined. Then a model is presented that illuminates the interplay between these two important concepts and their role in the more ecological state of 'Being Present'.

## **Chapter 10. Integrating Experience**

In Chapter 10 the theory of transfer of learning is examined, and the nature of what is being transferred back into the workplace following a coaching intervention is discussed. It is assumed that coaching will result in a new and enhanced understanding of situations – a type of expertise. Therefore, integration of that understanding involves encouraging the application of increased cognitive awareness and skill to future experiential use. The chapter looks at ways of effecting this transfer through extrapolation techniques, such as role play and scenario planning.