## Coaching – the word

The meaning of coach as a teacher/tutor has its origins in 19th century English university examinations and this meaning was transferred into the sporting arena1. (It is therefore somewhat ironic that we are importing coaching concepts from the sporting arena to bring back into education2!) Coaching in its grammatical form is the present participle of coach3 which embodies a sense of ongoing action. Landreville et al. feel that coaching should be considered “a process that guides a learner towards performance improvement”2 rather than a discrete event. I agree that coaching is a process, but believe that the focus on performance is too restrictive and overlooks the importance of coaching on identity formation4.

## “The concept of a coach is slippery”5 – Atul Gawande

Coaching is a diverse field with different standards and methodologies, and the diversity of definitions reflects this. (See introductory chapters in Passmore6 or van Niewerburgh7 for examples.) However, I prefer Stone and Heen’s simple language – they define the purpose of coaching as helping someone “learn, grow or change”8. They also distinguish coaching from appreciation8 and evaluation4,8. Meanwhile Watling and LaDonna’s qualitative research of coaches (including sports coaches and self-identified medical coaches) discerned themes of relationship building and trust, mutual goal setting, reflective practices and embracing failure9 (which could be considered a growth mindset paradigm10).

## Coaching – a definition

Thus I propose a definition of coaching as the complex process2 of collaborating with someone to learn, grow or change8 that involves relationship building9, goal setting9 and reflective practices9 that acknowledge strengths and embrace failures9,10. During this complex process, the coach may choose from a range of coaching techniques that depend on the coach, the coachee and the environment in which the coaching is taking place – facilitative coaching (where the coach primarily asks questions of the coachee); directive coaching (where the coach primarily tells the coachee what to do); or dialogical coaching (where the coach balances asking and telling)11.

## Coaching – a conceptual model

This model attempts to integrate the coaching definition above with other coaching concepts in a Venn diagram format.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

### Coaching chatter

In this model, I introduce here the concept of “coaching chatter”- a casual, continual conversation with the goal of learning, growth, or change. I conceive coaching chatter as dialogues that encompass learning conversations (“a dialogue informed by an educator’s observations of a learner’s behaviour in actual or simulated clinical practice, conducted with the intention of improving future performance”12), coaching-in-the-moment2, and coaching feedback8 (both of which might be informed by other people’s observations or a coach’s observations of the coachee’s behaviour outside clinical practice). I have specifically chosen the word “chatter” to emphasise the informal or casual tone of the conversations, the neutralisation or absence of hierarchy or power, the immediacy of the communication (think of online chat rooms), and the frequency with which these conversations should take place. As the concept of a chat involves both asking and telling, coaching chatter straddles the subsets of facilitative and dialogical coaching, but probably not directive coaching (which is more about telling).

### Coaching-over-time, role modelling, banking models of education and appreciative feedback

Coaching-over-time2 spans all three domains of Knight’s model. Role modelling (e.g. show-and-tell in the Zwisch model of progressive autonomy13) is an important part of coaching and spans dialogical and directive coaching domains. Passive training/teaching/instruction models (i.e. banking models of education14) are limited to directive coaching styles and on occasion sit outside coaching as they sometimes achieve neither growth, learning nor change (i.e. are ineffective). I have created an overlap between appreciative feedback8 and coaching (but not coaching feedback to stay true to Stone and Heen8) because of the role it might play in relationship building.

### Evaluation/Assessment

Evaluation/assessment, especially formal and/or summative assessment has been placed outside coaching because it potentially impedes relationship building between coach and coachee; potentially encourages inauthentic performances that may dwarf the growth of the coachee’s professional identity4; and potentially impedes reflective practices15 through high levels of perceived self-threat invoking self-serving bias16 and mnemic neglect17. This is also consistent with Stone and Heen’s conception of coaching8.

### Mentoring

Finally, while Landreville et al. attempt to define mentoring as “confidential, non-judgemental relationship between two individuals with the ultimate goal of encouraging the mentee to take charge of their own development”2), I share van Niewerburgh’s, and Stone and Heen’s view that splitting coaching and mentoring is unnecessary7,8 (and probably a waste of mental energy). I have therefore not included mentoring in this conceptual model.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that this Venn diagram and proposed coaching definition help to further the discussion on what coaching is and is not in medical education.

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