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Approaches to the postgraduate education of business coaches

Grace McCarthy
Sydney Business School
University of Wollongong

This paper focuses on the education and training of business coaches, specifically at the Masters/graduate level. The paper first reviews the knowledge and skills required of business coaches, comparing the recommendations of professional associations and the literature. Next the paper reviews the approaches to education which are best suited to help students acquire knowledge and skills, and how these may be assessed. The paper discusses the challenge of developing both knowledge and skills, and the use of e-learning as an on-going support for students. The benefits of authentic assessment and a varied approach to learning are also reviewed. Thirdly, the paper reports on the experiences of a new Master of Business Coaching at Sydney Business School, University of Wollongong, Australia, providing both performance and perception data from the first cohort of students. Possible reasons for the students' strong performance are suggested.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in business coaching (Grant 2008, Hawkins 2006). According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK, 82% of respondents to their annual Learning and Development Survey in 2010 use coaches. Business coaching is here defined as the application of coaching skills in a business context, excluding other forms of coaching such as life coaching, or other services such as counselling or mentoring. It can include coaching which is focused on the individual's development, on team performance, or on business performance issues relating to strategy and goals.

Many commentators, such as Clegg, Rhodes *et al.* (2005) and Sherman and Freas (2004) have observed that the coaching industry is unregulated, with low/no barriers to entry. Neat (2006: 32) noted 'an influx of over-hyped, ill-equipped people calling themselves coaches—yet often bereft of business acumen, empathy and analytical skills'. There are calls for accreditation and training, in the hope that this will raise the standards of the profession and give purchasers of coaching services some quality assurance.

This paper focuses on the education and training of business coaches, specifically at the Masters/graduate level. The paper first reviews the knowledge and skills required of business coaches. Next, the paper reviews the approaches to education which are best suited to help students acquire the knowledge and skills, and how they may be assessed. Thirdly, the paper reports on the experiences of a new Master of Business Coaching at Sydney Business School (University of Wollongong, Australia) and suggests reasons for the results obtained.

Prior to the global financial crisis, Bennis and O'Toole (2005) argued that graduate business education is generally not grounded in business practice and hence has become less relevant to practitioners.

They lamented that many academics in business schools have no business experience. Podolny (2009:63) articulates his concern that 'many academics aren't curious about what really goes on inside companies'. In their guidelines for Masters of Public Administration courses, Coxhead *et al.* (2009) advocate teaching and assessment by a team comprising university academics and public services practitioners. The author of this paper is the Coordinator of the Master of Business Coaching course and also lectures on the course. Working with colleagues in industry and other universities has enabled us to rise to the challenge of developing a new course rather than take one side of 'the old academic versus practitioner dichotomy' which Grant (2008: 97) argues 'is spurious, unhelpful at best, and frequently quite destructive'.

Knowledge

Many coaches have been trained in atheoretical, proprietary models of coaching with a limited evidence base, according to Rostron (2009: 323) and Grant and Cavanagh (2007: 241). A Masters program, by contrast, aims to help students model their advanced understanding of a specialist body of theoretical and applied topics (Australian Qualifications Framework 2010). Our Master of Business Coaching enables students to develop a body of knowledge including new perspectives relating to coaching, professional coaching practices, cognitive skills enabling them to demonstrate critical analysis and understanding of theory, and reflective skills to enable them to reflect on professional theory and practice. Our students learn about a broad range of coaching models, from the widely used GROW (Goals Reality Options What/Will) model popularised by Whitmore (1996), to more recent models such as ITEA (Impact Thought Emotion Action) (Leimon 2005), and referring to behavioural models and systems models (Barner and Higgins 2007).

The need for coaches to develop a solid understanding of business is underscored by Charlton (2009: 3) who, in his commentary on the likely future scenario for business coaching, suggests that:

> Those woolly-minded coaches, wrapped up in air-head 1960s faux philosophy, will find their days are numbered. The ones who will survive with a degree of comfort during the downturn will be those who can ally coaching with sound business and commercial experience and can bring that to the coaching table.

Furthermore, we agree with Podolny (2009) about the need to avoid 'disciplinary silos'. Instead, we seek to integrate business disciplines with coaching theory and practice. Students learn about theories of leadership and motivation, ethics and diversity, strategy development and implementation, innovation and change, and how coaching skills are relevant to each of these domains, thus avoiding the situation common in business degrees criticised by Bennis and O'Toole (2005) where, the 'integration of disciplined-based knowledge with the requirements of business practice is left to the student'.

Coaching skills

Unlike established professions with clear guidance from relevant accrediting bodies or institutions, we had the freedom and the challenge of first determining what skills we wanted our students to develop. We looked in detail at academic literature and at competency frameworks defined by the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). While the EMCC competencies are evidence-based, Griffiths and Campbell (2008) suggest that the development of the ICF competencies is eclectic and unscientific. However, their research found empirical support for many of the ICF competencies, although this may have been expected as their survey was of ICF-accredited coaches. A comparison of coaching competencies is shown in Table 1. Fortunately, there is considerable overlap in the competencies

identified in the literature, although exactly how each author defines concepts such as 'listening' or 'presence' may vary.

From this table, it can be seen that the coaching skills included in the SBS course are supported both by the coaching literature and coaching professional associations (ICF and EMCC). What is novel here is the integration of business skills as advocated by Feldman and Lankau (2005) and Berman and Bradt (2006), and research skills for coaches (Rostron 2009, Passmore & Gibbes 2007). Business skills include the development and implementation of strategy, innovation and change management, leadership and people management. Many of our students are experienced practitioners who have not studied for many years. Workshops include strategies for finding academic and company information, critical analysis and academic writing, reflective writing, and strategies for tackling assignments and exams.

Throughout the program, students are encouraged to self-assess, gain feedback, reflect on their learning and experience, and to set targets for their continued development as coaches. Moon (2004:74) stresses that 'learning extends beyond formal education and becomes very important in self-managed continuing professional development'. By encouraging the use of reflection through assignments and through the provision of self-assessment resources, we encourage students to take responsibility for their learning both in and outside the classroom. Black and Plowright (2010: 246) define reflection as:

Table 1: Comparison of coaching competencies

Identified in Literature	ICF	EMCC	SBS Coaching Skills	SBS Business Skills Coaches
Self-management Ahern (2003)		Beliefs Attitudes Self- management	Self-assessment and management	Time management
Ethics Ahern (2003)	Meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards		Ethics of coaching	Developing strategy
Relationship Hawkins & Smith (2006) Ahern (2003) Wilson (2007) Leimon 2005)	Establishing the coaching agreement	Contracting	Internal and external coaching relationships Context	Implementing strategy
Trust Dubrin (2005)	Establishing trust		Trust	Market research
Presence Ahern (2003)	Presence		Presence	Negotiation

Identified in Literature	ICF	EMCC	SBS Coaching Skills	SBS Business Skills Coaches
Listening Hawkins & Smith (2006) Ahern (2003) Wilson (2007) Dubrin (2005) Leimon (2005)	Listening	Listening	Listening	Managing partnerships and alliances
Questioning Hawkins & Smith (2006) Ahern (2003) Wilson (2007) Leimon (2005)	Questioning	Questioning	Questioning Challenging Reframing	Facilitating use of innovation tools
Communication	Communication		Communication	Communication
Awareness Dubrin (2005) Hawkins & Smith (2006) Wilson (2007) Dubrin (2005)	Creating awareness	Self-awareness Feedback	Self-awareness Reflection Feedback	Self Assessment Performance Management

Identified in Literature	ICF	EMCC	SBS Coaching Skills	SBS Business Skills Coaches
Action Hawkins & Smith (2006) Dubrin (2005)	Designing actions	Action planning	Action planning	Motivation
Goals Dubrin (2005)	Planning and goal setting	Goal setting	Goal setting	Prioritisation and decision-making
Progress Wilson (2007)	Managing progress and accountability	Managing the process	Process	Project management
Evaluation Wilson (2007		Evaluating	Evaluation	Supervision
Team coaching Zeus & Skiffington (2000) Clutterbuck (2007)			Team coaching	Manage change
Research (Rostron 2009)				Research skills

> ... the process of engaging with learning and/or professional practice that provides an opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate that learning or practice. The purpose is to develop professional knowledge, understanding and practice that incorporates a deeper form of learning which is transformational in nature and is empowering, enlightening and ultimately emancipatory.

Reflective skills, although not specific to coaching, are particularly valuable for coaches (Hay 2007). For many, the course provides an opportunity to reflect upon and understand their experience (Mezirow 1991) as well as to develop and enhance their skills and understanding of coaching and business theory. Furthermore, reflection not only forms a bridge between theory and personal experience, according to Cox (2005), but it is also a highly motivating experience.

Pedagogical choices

The educational theory basis for this course relates to andragogy (Knowles 2005), constructivism (Kolb 1984, Schön 1983) and transformative learning (Mezirow 1991). Andragogy is appropriate because the students are mature adults who can take responsibility for their own learning and who are keen to learn as this course is relevant to their work. A constructivist approach suits because the course combines both theory and practice, calling for approaches which help students reflect on their experience, relate theory to practice, and to continue to develop their understanding and competence during and after the course. This approach is particularly appropriate here, as coaching is a young discipline with many differing schools of thought. The ability to tease out the subtle distinctions in definition, to highlight where there is empirical evidence of the effectiveness of particular approaches, and to explore ethical and business issues related to coaching, encourage students to engage both in class and in assignments. This can lead to genuine insights and transformation of their understanding of what coaching

is and how it works. As Mezirow (1991: 11) pointed out: 'Making meaning is central to what learning is all about'. Interestingly, Cox and Bachkirova (2009) argue that regardless of the specific coaching framework coaches use, all coaching is based on adult learning theory, in particular the theories of Knowles *et al.* (2005), Kolb (1984) and Mezirow (1990). Hence there is congruence between the course content and the educational approaches adopted.

Mode of delivery

One of the early decisions was about how best to deliver the course: face-to-face or distance learning, weekly or intensive blocks, one subject at a time or in parallel. While virtual coaching is an important topic, it is our belief that coaching skills development is best achieved face-to-face. Discussing and applying theory collectively ensures that students engage with the material and truly understand it. According to Moon (2004:20), students do not build meaning alone, but rather 'in conjunction with the collected experiences of others'. Furthermore, the peer support effect is powerful, as noted by Murray (2009) who found that learning groups empower adult learners, encouraging dialogue and reflection on theory and practice, and enhancing professional development. In relation to peer supervision of coaches, Hay (2007) suggests that group sessions help people to see mistakes as learning opportunities, to explore multiple perspectives on the same issue and to feel validated by the reactions of others. This, she argues, enables potent learning which allows people to update their frame of reference.

We find that having two-day blocks of teaching is advantageous as this allows students to explore topics in depth. Between the two-day sessions, students read, research, write assignments, practise their skills and return to discuss their reflections. We noted Grant's (2007) research which found that coaching students' emotional intelligence, measured using the Schutte Emotional Intelligence

Scale (Schutte 1998), improved more over a 13-week program than on a two-day program. Grant defined emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive accurately emotions in oneself and others, to use emotions to facilitate thought, to understand how emotions can change over time, to manage emotions and translate them into constructive action. However, in Grant's research, participants on the two-day program were only given a condensed version of what was included in the 13-week program, hence differences might be expected. Davies (2006) notes that on a range of measures such as learning outcomes, student commitment and interaction, intensive mode delivery has shown comparable and sometimes better results than traditional delivery. He summarises the advantages of intensive teaching as 'increased motivation, commitment, and concentration, diversity of teaching methods, stimulation and enthusiasm, stronger relations among students, and flexibility'. However, he also warns that shortening courses may result in student cramming, less active discussion and superficial treatment of content. In our case, we were not shortening an existing course but designing a new course, specifying the number of days we regarded as necessary to achieve the learning outcomes. Our subjects are delivered over a 10-week period, for example, one-day introduction, two days a month later and two days a month later again. We would not expect a five-day block of intensive learning to be as valuable for two reasons, firstly, because concentration can wane as Bambacas *et al.* (2009) found on a four-day intensive MBA course, and secondly, because the learning between classes adds to the richness of the learning and the quality of in-class discussion (Merriam *et al.* 2007).

Finally, we chose to deliver the program one subject at a time, so that students can build in later subjects on what they had previously learned. We do not mean an accumulation of knowledge but rather, as in the constructivist approach outlined by Moon (2004), learning is seen as a network, where new ideas are linked by the learner, and if regarded as meaningful, added to what they already understand.

For example, in the subject Innovation, improvement and change management, students apply their coaching skills in eliciting ideas for innovation and setting goals for implementation. To their existing 'toolbox' of coaching skills (Megginson 2005), students add innovation tools (Chai 2005). The option of taking one subject at a time is feasible because Sydney Business School operates on four terms a year.

Teaching theory

Within the broad framework of a constructivist approach to learning, the next set of choices related to the best ways to put across the theory covered in each subject. The main choices we considered were:

- traditional lectures with case studies and group discussions
- giving students the responsibility to read set texts before class
- video clips of relevant points or of someone else discussing relevant points
- learning sets with students presenting their learning to each other.

We concluded that a mix of approaches would be best, both for the lecturer and the students. We did not at any point consider using traditional lectures without break-out sessions. Delivering a two-day module in this way would be extremely tiring for both lecturer and students, and we did not believe that the students would retain as much of the information or be able to apply it as if they were actively engaged (Killen 2007). The student perceptions reported later in this paper support this choice.

Developing skills

To develop skills, it is not enough for students to listen or read about the relevant skills—they have to learn by doing. Kolb (1984) identified a four-stage cycle of learning, where students move from concrete experience to reflection, then to abstract conceptualisation and active

experimentation. We incorporate a number of opportunities for students to develop and reflect on their skills in the safe environment of the classroom. These include:

- demonstration of skills—live and on video
- explanation followed by students coaching each other
- listening, paraphrasing/reflecting, questioning and feedback exercises
- students coaching real clients in the classroom
- students acting as coach supervisors for each other
- video of students coaching, which students can take away, review and reflect upon.

Adopting a constructivist approach to experiential learning, the lecturers in this context take on the role of facilitators of reflection, as highlighted by Merriam *et al.* (2007), who 'encourage learners to discuss and reflect on concrete experiences in a trusting, open environment'. However we seek to allow for all four of Kolb's (1984, 2005) learning styles by devising activities for each.

Kolb learning styles	**Examples of activities**
Diverging	Brainstorming, group discussions of different perspectives, observing others coach
Assimilating	Lecture, group discussion of coaching frameworks
Accommodating	Listening exercise, group activities
Converging	Coaching simulation

While we have not assessed students' learning styles, the student feedback reported later in this paper suggest that students value a variety of activities.

A key consideration was how to enable students to build up their confidence, and to work with the doubts which are common in both

new and experienced coaches, according to de Haan (2008). It is important for students to assess themselves fairly and to re-define their development aims on an on-going basis.

A further consideration in setting in-class coaching activities is whether they should relate to real life issues or role plays, which are subtly different as highlighted by Moore (2005). As there are always real issues on which students can coach each other, real life contexts allow students to practise coaching without having to remember details of a role play. The confidences shared in this safe environment strengthen the bonds between students. On the other hand, role plays allow students to experiment with responses to a particular situation and can also be useful.

Balancing theory and skills development in the classroom involves continuous refinement, to ensure the optimum mix in the given timeframe. In reviewing the program, we have increased the number of face-to-face days per year from 16 days to 20, in order to devote adequate time to each topic.

Assessment

Boud (2007) advocates an approach to assessment which goes beyond a quality assurance framework to one which will help students improve their own judgement of their performance during and after the course, will foster self-regulation, and recognises the varied contexts in which learning takes place. Understanding of theory and its application can be assessed in traditional academic formats, such as essays or exams. Our written assignments also require a personal, creative contribution on the student's part and not merely a précis or analysis of previous research. For example, to explore the topic of ethics in coaching, one assignment asks the students to research different types of codes of conduct, to decide which elements are most appropriate for a business coach, and then to devise their own code of conduct for a business coach, justifying each element they include

and giving guidelines for its implementation. An added advantage of such assignments is that students will not find something previously written which exactly answers the question they have been asked.

We include in our assessments action learning reviews, as defined by Zuber-Skerritt (2002:11): 'learning from experience and critical reflection on that experience—through group discussion, trial and error, discovery, and learning from and with each other'. Students reflect on how they have applied their coaching skills in a particular context and how their experience relates to the concepts covered on the course, which helps to plan for their own development. In Schön's (1983) terminology, this is reflection-on-action, rather than reflection-in-action. Action learning can be used, according to Bourner and Flowers (1997), to develop students' ability to generate ideas and evidence, to facilitate the personal development of students, and to develop the capacity of students to plan and manage their own learning. Including a reflective and developmental element enriches assignments, removing them from the purely theoretical domain, to something meaningful for the student. As Hartog (2004: 397) reports, 'students learn best when they are engaged in live and meaningful learning'. The hook of relevance makes the learning experience stronger and longer lasting, and in line with Boud (2007), develops students' capacity to continue to learn after they have graduated. Action learning can also be used, according to Hartog (2004: 400), as 'a vehicle for developing integrity and ethical practice and introducing them [the students] to a discipline of action and reflection that they would have for the rest of their lives'.

As for examinations, the intention is not to test student memory but their understanding. Examinations are not appropriate in all subjects but they do have a place within a Masters program where students are developing a knowledge base as well as a skills base. In order to demonstrate their understanding, students are expected to select and use concepts appropriately, relate concepts, and demonstrate the

application of theory to real world situations (Boulton-Lewis 1995). According to Carless *et al.* (2006), summative assessments can have a beneficial effect on the focus of study and how students learn.

In addition to assessing students' understanding of coaching theory in assignments and exams, students are also assessed on their business coaching skills. Coaching skills cannot be assessed by assessing a student's writing. Instead, skills assessment involves students undertaking authentic tasks such as coaching sessions, feedback sessions, client presentations, business plans and group facilitation exercises. These are authentic in the sense that they are tasks which a business coach might realistically expect to perform. They conform to Herrington and Herrington's (1995) criteria for effective authentic assessment, namely, an array of tasks in a realistic context, requiring the student to display judgement and perform effectively, and providing multiple indicators of learning. Being able to take away a video of their coaching session provided a powerful learning stimulus which the students rated very highly, although some found it uncomfortable to watch and listen to themselves. The video allowed them to see themselves as an outsider, to see instances where they could have responded differently or to become aware of certain habits of speech or body language. Some found that they also noticed new things about the person they were coaching and realised that they had not been paying enough attention to visual or auditory cues while coaching. While the end of the actual coaching session left students feeling very positive about how the session had gone, in reviewing the video, they could see many opportunities for improvement. The videos therefore provided a stimulus for reflection, as noted by Orland-Barak and Rachamim (2009), enabling students to improve their self-assessment.

Detailed feedback is provided on each assessment task. Boud and Falchikov (2007) note that feedback from a variety of sources is vital. Many of our students are in senior positions and rarely receive

feedback of any kind. It can be a blow to their self-esteem to receive negative feedback. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) point out that motivation and self-esteem play a very important role in learning and assessment. When feedback is specific, timely and above all constructive, students react positively and strive for improvement.

Method

Student performance is assessed formally both in exams and assignments. Table 2 shows the student results for the first two core coaching subjects for the first cohort of students.

For the purpose of understanding student perceptions which can be used to inform course design and curriculum development, three types of formal feedback were sought. The first type of feedback is a Subject survey. The focus is the subject itself and how well students are supported in their learning. Table 3 shows the responses for the first two subjects for the first cohort of students.

The second type of survey is a Teacher evaluation survey, which is undertaken at the request of the lecturer. It focuses on how well the lecturer conducts the course. Results are available for the first and sixth subject only shown in Table 4.

Both these surveys are conducted in class without the lecturer present and response rates were 100%. The excellent response rate is attributed to the emphasis on two-way feedback throughout the course and the students' awareness that their opinions were a valuable input to improving the course for future cohorts. These two surveys are anonymous and analysed externally.

The third set of feedback was a survey distributed by the author to the students by email after the first two subjects had been completed. This survey focused on student reactions to the types of learning activities undertaken, assessments used and support services available. A response rate of 65% was obtained, which was

considered good given that all these students are working full-time as well as studying part-time. Although the responses were identifiable, confidentiality was guaranteed, with no responses included in this or other analysis which could identify a student or their organisation. As feedback is an integral feature of this course, students learn to give and receive feedback from the start of the course. Therefore, the issue of anonymity was not regarded as a deterrent.

Results

Performance

Student performance by this group was very high, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Student results for first two core Coaching subjects (n = 17)

Subject	Mean Grade*	SD
Introduction to Business Coaching	Distinction	5.48
Applied Coaching Skills	Distinction	6.24

* Grades: High Distinction = 85–100%, Distinction = 75–84%, Credit = 65–74%, Pass = 50–64%

Six lecturers taught the core subjects (the same lecturer taught the first and sixth subject, while two lecturers taught the second subject together). Student results were consistently higher than our other Masters' courses, averaging above 70%. This high performance was achieved despite the fact that many of these students had not undertaken any formal study for a long time, and most had had no experience of searching academic databases or writing critical analyses or reflections. The reasons for their excellent performance lie in a combination of factors which will be discussed later in this paper.

Perceptions

For the Subject survey, students were asked to rate a series of statements against the headings: strongly agree (+3), agree (+2), mildly agree (+1), mildly disagree (-1), disagree (-2) and strongly disagree (-3). A mean above zero indicates that student perceptions are more positive about the subject, with a mean of three being the highest; a mean below zero indicates negative perceptions with three being the lowest. Table 3 shows the results for the first two subjects.

Table 3: Subject survey results (n=17)

Question	Subj. 1 Mean	Subj. 1 SD	Subj. 2 Mean	Subj. 2 SD
Q1: In this subject the learning objectives were made clear to me	1.412	1.326	2.133	0.743
Q2: The assessment criteria were clearly stated at the beginning of the subject	2.353	0.624	2.067	0,704
Q3: Feedback on my work was provided to me in time to prepare for other assessment tasks	1.867	2.604	0.533	0.688
Q4: This subject helped me gain a better understanding of an area of study	2.294	0.619	2.6	0.632
Q5: My learning in this subject was well supported by:				
a) access to teachers	2.824	0.393	2.4	0.632
b) access to other assistance	2.412	1.064	2.133	0.64
c) learning tasks	2.176	1.298	2.067	1.309
d) learning resources	2.059	1.298	1.933	0.799
e) e-learning (if used)	1.824	1.139	1.933	1.163
Q6: Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this subject.	2.36	0.505	2.273	0.647
Subject Mean	2.154		2.0	

It can be seen from Table 3 that students were very satisfied with learning tasks (Q5c) in both subjects. However, in the first subject, the learning objectives were not made sufficiently clear. In the second subject, the students did not receive feedback in time to prepare for other assessment tasks, which is reflected in Q3. Timing of assessments can be difficult in teaching in intensive mode and we have addressed this issue in later instances of the subject. While the majority of the scores are high, the lower responses to some questions give some reassurance that the data reflect students' actual perceptions of their experience.

There were many positive comments on the survey. Several students commented that the involvement of experienced business coaches added credibility to the course. The difficulty of getting the right balance between theory and practice was reflected in mixed feedback, with some wanting more theory while others wanted more practice. Comments on the first subject praised the acknowledgement and encouragement of diverse opinions and healthy debate, and for the second subject, there were comments on the close bonds the group had formed and the genuine support for each other.

Teacher evaluation survey results are available for the first and last subject and, as shown in Table 4, demonstrated high levels of satisfaction, with ratings varying from 5.1 to 6, where 6 is the maximum.

Table 4: Teacher evaluation survey results (n=17)

Question	Subj. 1 Mean (Max.6)	Subj. 1 SD	Subj. 6 Mean (Max. 6)	Subj. 6 SD
Q1: This teacher is well prepared for the subject	5.8	0.437	5.9	0.258
Q2: This teacher presents the subject-matter clearly	5.5	0.717	5.9	0.258
Q3: This teacher organises and sequences the subject matter well	5.5	0.717	5.7	0.617
Q4: This teacher presents an appropriate amount of material for the time available	5.3	0.92	5.7	0.414
Q5: This teacher stimulates me to think about the subject	5.6	0.795	5.9	0.352
Q6: This teacher appears to be interested in helping me to learn	5.8	0.393	6.0	0
Q7: This teacher is helpful in response to my questions or problems	5.7	0.588	6.0	0
Q8: Because of this teacher, I have felt enthusiastic about studying this subject	5.5	0.874	5.6	0.632
Q9: This teacher encouraged me to interact with other students	5.4	0.618	5.5	0.64
Q10: This teacher organised class time effectively and efficiently	5.1	0.928	5.3	0.737
Q11: This teacher encouraged participation in class discussions	5.8	0.393	5.5	0.743
Q12: Assignments marked by this teacher have been returned within a reasonable timeframe	5.9	0.277	5.9	0.363
Q13: Written comments on assignments marked by this teacher have been helpful	5.8	0.452	5.8	0.414
Q14: This teacher has been available to discuss problems and questions relating to my assignments or examinations	5.9	0.352	5.9	0.267
Overall Mean	**5.6**		**5.8**	

Free text comments for the first subject noted that there was an understanding that the students might not initially have strong research or writing skills and that support was put in place to help. The value of working with other motivated students was noted by many. Students commented that the discussions and learning begun in class continued outside the classroom. For the research subject, students welcomed the ability to understand and trial the research process and to choose a topic which was meaningful for them (the ability to choose is a strong motivator in adult learning according to Knowles 2005). However the limited time available put the students under pressure and this subject will be extended over two terms for students commencing in 2011.

The email survey also showed a very positive response to the in-class learning activities of the first two subjects, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Student rating of learning activities on a scale of 1 to 6, where 1 is low and 6 is high (n=17)

	Subj. 1		**Subj. 2**		**Subj. 1**	**Subj. 2**	**Subj. 1**	**Subj. 2**
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mode	Mode	Range	Range
Lecture	5	0.3	5	0.82	5	5	1	2
Discussion	6	0.5	5	0.42	6	5	1	2
Video	5	1.14			5		4	
Listening exercise	5	0.5			5		1	
Feedback exercise	5	0.5			5		1	
Brainstorming exercise	5	0.54			5		2	
Demonstration of coaching			5	1.17		5		4
Learning from fellow students' facilitation sessions			6	0.82		6		2
Coaching practice session			5	1.49		6		5

While the mean and mode are very high, the range indicates that a small number of students found some exercises such as observing fellow students' facilitation sessions, the live coaching demonstration and the video of little use. These students may prefer a more traditional style of learning from lectures and textual material. However, despite their low rating of these exercises, all the students performed well in the assessments, indicating that even where learning activities are not in a student's preferred style, the learning

outcomes can still be achieved. For the majority of students, all the activities used were beneficial. As students may have different learning styles and preferences (Kolb 1984, Sternberg 1997), it is to be expected that some students will prefer some activities to others. Hayes (1990:32) advises educators to 'recognize the diversity of adult learning needs, attitudes, and abilities, as well as the varied demands of different educational settings, and draw on a spectrum of instructional strategies'. In their comments, all the students rated the discussions highly, valuing the opportunity to learn from their fellow students as well as the lecturer, and to think through their own position on ethical and other professional aspects of coaching. Comments from students show that they appreciate that their experience is valued and that different perspectives are welcome. As Boud (1993) notes:

> Experience is not a given; it is created by learners in relation to the learning milieu and their own personal foundation of experience. Different learners will have quite different experiences within the context of the same learning event.

Furthermore, all students responded that it was very important to mix learning activities and lectures, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Student rating of importance of learning activities on a scale of 1 to 6, where 1 is not very important and 6 is very important (n = 11)

	Mean	**SD**	**Mode**	**Range**
It is important:				
to mix learning activities and lectures	6	0	6	0
to practise coaching in real situations	6	0	6	0
to practise coaching in role play situations	6	0.52	5 and 6	1

From Table 6, we can see that students do not want a purely theoretical or purely practical approach, but a mix of the two. They also see the opportunity to have the opportunity to practise coaching in real situations as very important. Thirdly, they regard coaching in role play situations as very important, only slightly lower than for 'real play', or practice in real situations.

Students also rated the assessments highly as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Student rating of assessment tasks on a scale of 1 to 6, where 1 is low and 6 is high (n = 11)

	Mean	**SD**	**Mode**	**Range**
Subject 1:				
Report Subject 1	5	0.5	5	1
Presentation	6	0.52	5	5 and 6
Reflection	5	0.98	6	2
Exam	5	0.79	4	2
Subject 2:				
Report Subject 2	5	1.19	6	4
Group facilitation	5	1.3	6	4
Coaching session	5	1.17	6	4

Again, the mean and the mode were very close, with the mean for all assessments at 5 out of a maximum of 6 marks, and the mode varying between 4 and 6. In the first subject, the distribution was close with marks only varying between 4 and 6. In the second subject, although the mean was 5 and the mode was 6, there was greater variation, with some students rating all three assessment tasks at 2 out of 6. However, in the free text comments in the subject evaluations, some students commented that the assessments were one of the best things

about the subject, getting them to focus in depth on relevant areas, to hone their research and critical thinking skills as well as their coaching skills.

Student comments were interesting, in particular in relation to the examination. Students noted that the examination encouraged them to review material which they might otherwise have skimmed over, had made them organise their learnings into a coherent structure for future reference, and had helped them develop a portfolio of ideas and models for their workplace. They commented positively on the inclusion of reflection and action learning. Interestingly, they also regarded the examination as less confronting than their coaching assignments. This may be because examinations assess knowledge rather than skills or self-awareness. As with the learning activities, a combination of assessment formats seems to work well.

Students were asked to rate the factors that mattered to them in receiving feedback on their assignments. Their responses are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Student ranking of assignment feedback factors, on a scale of 1 to 6, where 6 is very important (n = 9)

Factor	Average	SD
Specific and personalised to your assessment	4.3	1.22
Timely - available within 2 weeks of assignment submission date	4.0	1.32
Clearly linked to marking criteria	3.7	0.87
Lecturer available for discussion of feedback	3.7	0.87
Suggestions for improvement	3.3	1.41
Other	No suggestions	

Student perception of lecturers' performance against these criteria for the first two subjects was high, with averages of over 5 out of 6 against each.

Discussion

The performance data indicate that the students have clearly achieved the learning outcomes for the subjects they had completed at the time of the survey. The perception data indicate that the students enjoy a mix of theory and practice, a variety of learning activities,and a variety of assessment tasks. We believe the students' enjoyment and their achievement are linked. Braming (2007) points out that student satisfaction and student learning are not always linked, as transformative learning can be a painful process. However, in this case, the students' performance has been excellent. The positive ratings have been achieved, although it is stressed to the students that we are looking for honest feedback and suggestions for improvement.

The high performance and positive perceptions of the students can be attributed to a variety of factors:

1. The student selection process includes an interview to assess students' motivation and commitment to the course, and their ability to work well with others. This is in line with recommendations by Yang and Lu (2001) who argued that admission should not purely be on the basis of previous academic records but also other criteria such as career statements and personal interviews.
2. The course is organised on a cohort basis. Choy (2009) notes that adult learning is a social practice. The cohort system leads both to peer support and competition, study groups, revision sessions, and sharing of learning and notes. The cohort effect is fostered by exercises where students share experiences which they may not have shared with anyone previously and by students working

together on some assignments. The students see each other grow and help each other with genuine feedback.

3. A review of the assignments indicates that students experienced 'AHA' moments at varying times during the first two subjects, an 'AHA' moment being a moment of insight when something in the theory or discussion chimed with their personal experience, a concept become real, something made sense, or in Liljedahl (2005: 220) words, 'it is the turning on of the light after six months of groping in the dark'. Examples of 'AHA' moments on this course included students suddenly connecting their everyday coaching practice with the theory, realising that their listening skills were not as good as they had believed, and students realising that other people thought highly of their coaching skills, even if they themselves still felt inexperienced.
4. The course content is highly relevant to the students, which enhances their initial motivation. As Killen (2007) argues, the more subjects are seen as relevant, the more students are likely to find meaning in them, and hence the more powerful the learning experience.
5. The mode of course delivery allows time both for reflection and for in-depth exploration. The two days at a time format allows students to get into topics in depth. The month back in the workplace allows them to try things out and to bring that experience back to the next face-to-face session and/or to reflect on it in a log. This blending of theory and application enables students to develop a deep understanding, rather than merely learning concepts for an examination (Murphy 2005).
6. The 24 x 7 availability of the e-learning site means that information is available at any time, including lecture slides, self-assessments, notes on models and skills. Students nowadays expect this. As Ellis *et al.* (2009) note, e-learning is now a

fundamental part of the learning experience in higher education, and no longer the domain solely of those universities engaged in distance learning.

7. The involvement of colleagues in the Library and Learning Development, who tailor workshops to help students develop the skills necessary to meet the academic requirements of the course. This is in line with Meldrum and Tootell (2004) who reported that collaboration of library and academic staff, integration of information literacy in the curriculum and linking with assessment supports successful outcomes.

Conclusion and further developments

There are many approaches to coaching education, some rooted in psychology, others arising from adult education, and others in business schools, as noted by Cox *et al.* (2010). As a business school, Sydney Business School has carefully defined its approach to coaching, and considered carefully what the students should learn and what approaches we can use to help them learn. In doing so, we have tried to address the need in the marketplace for business coaches who are well versed in the theory and practice of coaching, who understand the application of coaching in a business context, and who are equipped with the critical, reflective and research skills to continue to develop as coaches on graduation and to contribute to the development of the field through practitioner research. We aim to help students not only to develop practical coaching skills but also to equip them with the critical and reflective skills to choose, modify, develop and evaluate their own coaching approaches. We base our approach on theories of adult learning, particularly andragogy, experiential and transformative learning, theories which also underpin coaching itself (Cox *et al.* 2010).

We continue to get feedback from our students on each subject and we have also planned longitudinal surveys of our graduates one year, two years and five years post-completion. The changes made

to the course so far have been to increase the number of face-to-face days to allow more time for discussion, for theory to be processed and more practice to be gained, and to improve the balance between theory and practice in each subject. We have also allocated more time for completion of the research project. We are fortunate that our students, graduates and applicants include business coaches and employers of business coaches. We gain from their multiple perspectives, getting ideas from them and testing ideas with them. Together with benchmarking with other universities and monitoring of academic literature on coaching, management and educational theory as well as professional practice, this will allow us to hone both our approaches and the content, so that our program will constantly evolve. However, it will evolve within the core parameters we have established from the start, namely, a rigorous academic degree combined with real world experience and business understanding.

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About the author

Dr Grace McCarthy *is the Coordinator of the Master of Business Coaching at Sydney Business School, University of Wollongong, an innovative course enabling students to apply theory and skills in their organisations. Prior to joining this University, Grace was a researcher at Manchester Business School, exploring business excellence, leadership and innovation, building on her years of experience in a multinational company.*

Contact details

Sydney Business School, University of Wollongong,
NSW 2522, Australia
Tel: +61 2 42214880 *Fax: +61 2 42214709*
Email: gracemc@uow.edu.au