

# A Well-Informed Curiosity: Evolving a Model of Coaching Research

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The growing dialogue about coaching research makes the case for including research to develop coaching as a professional practice. Evidence-based coaching (Grant, 2003; Laske, Stober, Edwards, 2004) and the scientist-practitioner model (Stober, 2004) have relevance for the practice of coaching, the education of coaches, and the credibility of the coaching field. These articles, coupled with the experience of co-editing the ICF Research Symposium Proceedings (2004, 2005) stimulated my interest in the intersection of the models and the practice of coaching research (research on coaching and research in coaching). The intent of this study is to bridge theory and practice by exploring two questions: 1) Which elements, if any, of the scientist-practitioner and reflective-practitioner models are enacted in current coaching research? 2) How might the scientist-practitioner and reflective-practitioner models inform the construction of a comparable model for coaching researchers?

## *Relevant Models*

The model of the scientist-practitioner developed within the field of clinical psychology. The reflective-practitioner model is applied in several areas of professional practice including psychology, education and architecture. Together, the models propose directions, purposes and methods for exploring, extending and confirming professional standards of practice. Stober (2004) proposes the scientist-practitioner stance “as a pair of glasses through which we view coaching.” Such a lens “brings gaps and blindspots into focus as we grow an emerging profession” (p. 15). The scientist-practitioner (Boulder) model arose in response to concerns within the clinical psychology profession about the credibility of the field; the variety of theoretical approaches to practice; and the differences in content and methods of training programs. “Clinical psychology is an applied science, therefore partly an art...” and as researchers evolve the scientific side of clinical psychology, the artistic side of practice is reduced (Peterson, p 252). The proceedings of the Boulder Conference identified the standards for professional education and practice in three areas: diagnosis, therapy, and research (Raimy cited in Baker and Benjamin, 2000, p 245). This model recommends research to (1) develop a better understanding of human behavior; (2) improve the accuracy of diagnostic measures; (3) develop more efficient methods of treatment; and (4) develop methods of promoting mental hygiene and preventing maladjustment. (Raimy cited in Baker and Benjamin, 2000, p. 245). The existence of the model, however, has not ensured its practice. Although research training is integral to preparing clinical psychologists, the record of publications has been “disappointingly low” (Barlow, Hayes & Nelson, 1984). One underexplored value the model offers is its potential to “seek out alternative (if less than

rigorous) sources of knowledge such as theory which can enable the therapist to make informed decisions when empirical data are unavailable” (Corrie and Callahan, 2000, p. 417).

Donald Schon (1983) argued for reflecting-in-action in response to a seeming crisis of confidence in professional knowledge. Reflective practice can counterbalance the potential pitfalls of professional practice based on tacit knowledge which is enacted spontaneously and automatically. Reflection-in-action “tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of the action, the action itself and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action” (Schon, 1983, p 56). Such reflection enables the practitioner to bring tacit understanding to the surface and, through critical examination, “make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience” (Schon, 1983, p. 56). The reflective practitioner seeks to discover the unique characteristics of a practice situation by engaging in a form of dialogue with the challenges. Such an exchange requires an “artistry ... evident in [the practitioner’s] selective management of large amounts of information...ability to spin out long lines of invention and inference and...hold several ways of looking at things at once without disrupting the flow of inquiry (Schon, 1983, p 130). As the problem is reframed, the practitioner devises and forms an experiment to test the frame and the effect of a different response. The successful outcomes of such experiments reflect not only the practitioner’s “ability to solve the new problem...but...appreciation of the unintended effects of action...and the ability to make an artifact that is coherent and an idea that is understandable “ (Schon, 1983, p. 186).

Cox (2003a) defines evidence-based coaching as “an approach which claims that practice should be capable of being justified in terms of sound evidence: it is the process of methodically seeking out, evaluating and utilizing up-to-date research findings to support decisions about practice” (p. 1). Coaching researchers use “theoretical frameworks, hypotheses and observation to arrive at empirical evidence about the coaching process, its preconditions, limits, outcomes and embedded ness in larger systemic environments “ (Laske, Stober & Edwards, 2004, p.170). Evidence is constructed, derived from a theoretical model and formed through purposeful application of focus and methods. (Laske, Stober & Edwards). Maxwell (2004b) argues that qualitative research can be scientific and a valued means of inquiry since it addresses some of the limits of quantitative and experimental research and urges dialogue to continue between practitioners of those research models.

An agenda for coaching research may be driven by considerations of growing the profession or strengthening individual practice. Grant (2003) encourages an evolving coach research agenda in the service of moving coaching to the status of a profession. Such agenda would “focus on the evaluation of coaching by following established research methodologies... (and) an increasing emphasis on quantitative outcomes measures as well as investigating the relative efficacy of different approaches to coaching”(Grant, 2003, p. 10). Because practice situations may not lend themselves to controlled empirical experimentation, reflection-in-action qualifies as experiment in

Schon's view. He distinguishes exploratory experiments – that is taking action to see what follows; move-testing experiments- that is taking action to obtain or fail to obtain an intended consequence; and hypothesis testing in which one seeks to “effect an intended discrimination among competing hypotheses” (Schon, 1983, p.146). Because reflection-in-action is iterative, such experiments encompass all three forms simultaneously. Coaching draws on a wide range of life experience. Within the uniqueness of each coaching interaction it may not be possible to forecast what knowledge, skills or experiences will be needed at any particular time. “What distinguishes novice from master is the former follows models and schema; the latter is able to draw upon a broad knowledge and experiential base and apply what is appropriate to the context at hand, recognizing that every event is unique despite the similarities to previous events...The action oriented nature of knowledge suggests that coaches...will be modifying their existing knowledge through their practice” (Cox, 2003b, p. 15).

### *Procedures*

I followed a flexible, qualitative design collecting and analyzing data from three sources: semi-structured interviews, research papers published by the participants and participant curriculum vitae. Invited participants had 1) conducted research specifically about coaching (methods, outcomes, theory); 2) presented and published their research paper as recommended by peer-review; and 3) had an active coaching practice. A letter of invitation was mailed to all coaching researchers whose papers were accepted for presentation at the International Coach Federation Research Symposium (2003 or 2004) and inclusion in the proceedings. Of the 37 researchers contacted, 17 agreed to take part and signed consent forms. Two of this group self-eliminated, since they were not currently involved in coaching.

I conducted individual semi-structured telephone interviews which were taped. During the interviews I took extensive notes. The tapes were used to supplement, amend and confirm the data in the notes. I used a template approach to analysis of the interview data, looking for research purposes, practitioner skills and training, and researcher motivations. In addition, I looked for indicators of three types of experiments: exploratory, move-testing and hypothesis testing (Schon, 1983). Responses were coded and the resulting data elements were grouped. I categorized research questions as theory-building, outcomes assessment, development of an intervention model or development of an assessment model. Methodologies were characterized as quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. Curriculum vitae yielded data on participants' formal training and education and prior research experience.

## *Findings*

Participants' responses reflected several aspects of the scientist-practitioner and reflective-practitioner frameworks. Respondents undertook their studies undertaken with an investigative spirit. Engagement in the research process, as well as learning from the outcomes of the studies, had an impact on respondents' coaching and research competencies as well as their professional identity and vision for the practice of coaching.

### *Coaching Research Purposes*

Most of the projects measured the effects of coaching or the effectiveness of a coaching delivery model in an organizational setting. Of these, two concerned developing standard coaching algorithms. In addition, three papers explored elements of the coaching process and one tested the impact of coaching on college students. All the projects were consistent with one or more of the purposes within the scientist-practitioner model and with the exploratory or move testing types of reflective practice.

Respondent motivations included pragmatism and intellectual curiosity in almost equal measure. One respondent summed up the combination by asking "How do we know we're doing a good job beyond the clients loving us?" Several respondents wanted to better understand "why does this work?" with "this" being a coaching process, a system of using language, or a model for the delivery of coaching. World events after 9-11 led one respondent to explore coaching as a means of social transformation, wondering "how will coaching managers being self-actualized change the world (when) they're still not talking with each other?" Her inquiry led her to rethink coaching purposes and processes. Almost all the respondents saw research as a professional responsibility and opportunity to contribute to the growth of the profession. "Coaching is an emerging profession with needs to engage in and use research" to validate itself and its practices. Organizational concerns prompted some coaches to launch research projects. One respondent saw a need to create a standardized treatment model to create credibility for her work within partnering communities. Another respondent wanted to explore creating a replicable, standardized algorithm for internal coaching as a baseline for quality care. In a unique case among respondents, one coach was asked by the International Coach Federation to set up surveys to provide data about coaching practitioners and potential client markets.

### *Methodologies*

With few exceptions, the respondents noted the changing and dynamic nature of developing the research question and framing the research design. Three of the studies used quantitative methods alone. Five of the studies used mixed methods, most often a variation on an action research design. Seven of the studies used qualitative methods only, some drawing heavily on the professional literature of related fields-predominantly

psychology and communication theory- to form interdisciplinary theoretical models. Two of these relied on qualitative interviews using appreciative inquiry and phenomenological approaches.

Many of the respondents changed the original scope of the research project in response to various externally imposed constraints. Projects were “scaled to human size” by the challenges of time, participants, human and material resources and the nature of the dissertation process. Changes included: narrowing the topic and the quantities of data resulting from qualitative inquiry; “figuring out where to draw the line on the project...to manage my own feelings and advocacy and maintain an objective view and passion at the same time.” Coaching research is perceived as an iterative process: each research project serves as a springboard for the next question, a bigger study, a repetition with more refinements. Three respondents characterized the changing contexts of coaching studies as “the Heisenberg problem”<sup>1</sup>. Another noted that “the biggest challenge ...is how to actually observe the process without changing it, being a fly on the wall.”

Respondents wanted more access to colleagues who could help them with design and instrument challenges. One said, “I didn’t know what I didn’t know”. Several see coaching research as “open territory” and the need to adapt and design instruments added a layer of challenge to their experiences. Many respondents noted the shortage of literature on coaching and borrowed heavily from the literature of related fields. For a few, undertaking a coaching research project was a matter of just plunging ahead and adjusting as needed, what one called “a triumph of ad-hoc-ery”. Another noted “We were blazing a trail that we didn’t know we were doing.”

Several respondents highlighted the difficulty of finding participants for their studies, especially those working with executives. One stated “Most graduate students don’t have access to executives for purposes of study.” Another pointed out that in many corporations, executives are reluctant to self-identify as coaching clients. Efforts to attract participants by giving away coaching were successful in one instance; in another, the respondent noted “when you give coaching for free, people don’t work as hard and that can bias the outcome.” In one study, the small number of survey respondents led to concerns about an unacceptable skew from even one negative respondent. Working through her coaching network to recruit clients had the potential to skew one respondent’s the participant pool.

Despite the challenges, the first-time coaching researchers and the more seasoned academic researchers completed their projects with an increased enthusiasm. “The inquiry became more gratifying than the outcome...and I’m most interested in, fascinated by, and curious about the research process”. Many respondents intended to continue doing coaching research, either an extension or variation of their published project or in a direction suggested by the outcomes of their published project.

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Heisenberg, a physicist, formulated a principle which can be applied to any system: the act of making observations changes the thing that is being observed.

### *Researcher Skills and Experiences*

Of the respondents, two-thirds held doctorates or were at the dissertation stage of a doctoral program at the time they undertook their projects. The remaining one-third held a master's degree and various forms of professional certification. All had a decade or more of professional work experience in various coaching-related fields. Three respondents relied heavily on their experience in managing large projects or clinical studies to manage the various research tasks such as setting up the protocols and handling large quantities of data, what one characterized as "people management and orchestration". The respondents who came from a wellness background were familiar with standard care algorithms and drew on these in their research design. Almost all respondents identified specific communication skills gained through professional practice which were valuable in conducting research. These include experience in constructing surveys and conducting interviews in a corporate context. Internal coaches drew on writing skills, especially chunking and information mapping, to make sense of interview data. Participants with backgrounds in counseling or therapy drew on skills in creating safe space, storytelling and deep listening, and awareness of the various elements and levels of discourse. One respondent reflected on her own convergent cognitive style, which she characterized as "like being a magpie hoarding little gems from all over which informs wonderful, multidisciplinary concoctions".

### *Definitions and Parameters Of Coaching*

Many respondents began their studies with an operational definition of coaching drawn from International Coach Federation, Coachville or Executive Coaching Forum documents. These changed in the course of conducting the research and learning from the outcomes of the study. The changes included broadening the definition to include team coaching in both method and measures of effectiveness or shifting the boundaries between coaching and organizational development. One respondent reported she was challenged to define coaching in a "parsimonious way", noting that a full definition of coaching, for research purposes, would take about five pages.

Becoming "far more aware" of management contributions to employee engagement suggested a broader scope for coaching within organizations to one respondent. Another respondent expanded her definition of organizational coaching beyond organizational sponsorship to include individual effects. "It's a process of bringing out inner wisdom in the individual... not consulting but helping client learn to reflect, think, rely on own wisdom- that's the piece I think is critical". One respondent observed the biggest challenge for coaches is having to follow the client's agenda fully, especially when the client's focus concerns "basic issues, not big dream/wonderful life issues." Research helped one respondent redefine coaching as "a highly personalized effective form of teaching" and his practice of coaching in Zen terms as a Way, a personal journey. A more visionary role for coaches emerged for one respondent who saw her purpose as "helping people who are going on to do great things to build the foundation of their cathedrals".

## *Coaching Processes and Strategies*

Engaging in research also informed respondents' thinking about how they interact with clients and the tools they bring to a coaching exchange. Research outcomes serve as a "beacon ...to think about how I'd coach teams or co-coach ...made me reflect on my practice...to give it some depth, to improve." For another, "When you have to pin down the coaching protocols and articulate desired outcomes, it sharpens your pencil, engages the scientist mind" in the coaching conversation.

The primacy of the coach-client relationship was reinforced for several respondents. "The consciously crafted relationship between coach and client defines coaching, not the specific skills." Another stated, "What is basic to coaching is to pare it back to its essence. The fundamental pieces: the relationship piece, respecting the enormous power of co-creating the relationships. The fundamental purpose of coaching is to let the person talk about their life, don't cut them off. The fundamental need of people is not to understand but to be understood." A third characterized the shift as moving to "a more pure coaching experience... Having people talk about this deep powerful experience really impacted me. The most useful findings..that people are starved for genuine feedback and the critical element of coaching is helping them develop critical thinking skills and offering ways to get data about themselves...Those Rogerian pieces-- the way of holding the coaching relationship."

Respondents who studied their coaching tools found their intuitive ways of working confirmed, refined or strengthened. This led a respondent to "clarifying my next direction of my own work leading toward creating a new domain of coaching." Another reassessed the power of metaphor. "Seeing metaphor as a tool for cognitive restructuring", this researcher "would consciously use metaphor including in executive coaching". A third gained perspective on herself as coach through the realization that "I use my (dialogue) model more than I inform them" which has led her to testing different ways of participating in the dialogue with clients.

## *Professional Identity*

Conducting research reinforced and extended professional identity in several ways. Respondents noted greater confidence and grounding in their practice. Study outcomes "add credibility to what I know works – why to do and not do." Another saw that "It's not voodoo" but solidly grounded in theory; not just about the Hawthorne effect... a solid basis which lends support to my own intuition and the intuition of those who came up with the model." For a first time researcher, "Using systemic inquiry, looking for evidence, applying a scientist mind strengthened my sense of my own knowledge...trusting myself more...knowing my gut is working off stuff I've learned."

In the words of one respondent, "the value proposition for research is that it has given a language and model for what you've been doing intuitively... a bounded container for how to talk about and think about what I do." In interactions with clients, "there's a

little academic sitting on my shoulder... Coaching provides materials for inquiry; inquiry generates tools and knowledge to inform practice, part of why the scientist-practitioner model is important to me as a coach and a researcher.” The research process affirmed the iterative and interactive nature of research and practice- “It’s critical to hold a scientist mind to the coaching experiences...making theories... That’s what I mean by theory-building...the idiosyncratic nature of that individual and the interdevelopmental process of meaning making.” “If there’s no transformative power (for the researcher), it’s not very effective research...good research engenders self-reflection and engagement.”

Research also strengthened respondents’ awareness of themselves as part of a larger coaching community. “research is reflection...(this) made me more reflective about my own practice, about coaching and about myself in the researcher’s journey...” “The research community helped me bridge to a new identity, one of those defining moments.” To another respondent, engaging in a culture of inquiry, “midwifing this field of coaching studies”, being in an adult learning environment and a dialogue informing processes, was a powerful experience: “Process is an end in itself.”

### *Building a Coaching Organization and the Field of Coaching*

Facing language translation issues for a survey helped a respondent to a greater appreciation for the global nature of the coaching profession. Study outcomes have influenced the way participant views coaching competencies. One reported being more mindful of the language used to speak about coaching. In the view of another, “coaching research offers the potential to alleviate concern or doubt in business... helps to broaden a practitioner’s mind which may be limited by old notions of management...It documents the impact on organizations in meaningful ways. There’s a real story to be told.” One consistent area of challenge for researchers: defining and standardizing what we do and establishing common protocols and measures to show results. “It’s hard for an academic who’s not coaching to do that. We’re doing this as a matter of necessity.”

### ***Summary and Reflections***

Current practitioners of coaching research are motivated first and foremost by curiosity about how and why coaching works and what individual or collective changes can be effected through coaching. All hold a commitment to reflective and well-informed coaching practice, reporting that conducting research, as well as the outcomes of their respective studies, influenced why and how they work with clients. A wish to contribute to the field of coaching was present for most, but secondary. Practical concerns such as meeting doctoral requirements, developing a business basis or documenting returns on corporate investment were also present but the choice of research focus was informed by a passionate desire to know more. Almost all the respondents reported they met and were strengthened by the challenges they faced in conducting coaching research. These included constraints of time, money, technical skills and, for some, a solid grounding in research principles and processes. The “Heisenberg problem” posed challenges to the



integrity of the research. While most of the respondents had doctoral training, all of them drew extensively on skills and knowledge gained through workplace experience.

Both the scientist-practitioner and reflective practitioner models have much to offer to an evolving coaching researcher model insofar as the individual practitioner is concerned. The extent to which respondents in this study reported a deepening and broadening of coaching practice and process supports the value of research in action and research on practice. Coaching, however, is distinct in critical ways from clinical psychology and the professional practices which are the “home fields” of the two models under review. Therefore, I propose to develop a bridging model of coaching research. This model posits coaching research as a means of cognitive, social and behavioral development in coaches.

Respondents’ beliefs, value frameworks and thinking were challenged and stretched as a result of engaging in coaching research. As one stated “what you experiment with you learn from and research is a well-organized learning experiment.” The developmental process implicit in coaching research mirrors a helix of evolutionary truces illustrating adult development (Kegan, 1982, p 109). This learning spiral depicts an upwardly emerging interplay between the processes of differentiation and inclusion. Coaching research begins by taking a step back from the practice with an objective eye; becoming intimate with the observation experience; stepping back to look at outcomes; incorporating outcomes into practice; stepping back once again to assess and moving to higher levels of complexity at each step. Professional identity becomes rooted in the social network of the coaching research community. Coaching behaviors draw on and are polished by reflection on objective evidence. Coaching researchers acquire language and conceptual frameworks of increasing complexity to describe and enact coaching.

A coaching research model needs to include three elements. First, the model would use a “new sciences” orientation to the practices and processes of research. We must acknowledge that the quantitative, positivist orientation of the scientist-practitioner model has changed since its beginning. The scientist-practitioner model requires a minimum level of competence in statistical methods; recent views of the model have expanded to encompass evaluation, policy research and case studies as research contributions (Barlow, Hayes & Nelson, 1984) . Since its inception, the emphasis on scientific research has waxed and waned and while the ideal continues to be supported, effecting the ideal has not happened in large part because of the lack of research methodologies suitable to practice. In other words, “It is not that the idea was wrong but rather than inability to develop the tools to implement the idea” (Barlow, Hayes & Nelson, , 1984, p 23). The Heisenberg principle in coaching research underscores the need for the coaching community to consider collectively what and how we view data. A new sciences perspective can inform a view of coaching research in which data encompasses both lasting and ephemeral objects. We can borrow a model for analysis of such data from quantum physics where systems emerge from relationships between and among the parts (Wheatley, 1999). The emergence may be the result of linear or nonlinear methods of meaning making. The process of such research design is organic and interactive (Maxwell, 2005).

The next element of a coaching research model encompasses defining fields of inquiry. In this model, coach researchers undertake systematic exploration of coaching research questions. Modifying the original purposes in the Boulder model, I suggest that such fields of inquiry might be

- (1) to develop a better understanding of the human change process
- (2) to improve the accuracy and reliability of coaching assessment and outcomes measures
- (3) to develop more grounded methods of coaching interventions and
- (4) to develop more grounded models for promoting client change and growth.

The research questions may be driven by the coach researcher's individual interests or by the interests of some external organization. Alternatively, research questions may emerge as a result of constructed, collective thinking within the coach researcher community.

The final element of the coaching research model is an integrated support structure which comprises skills development, access to information and technical and collegial support. The education of coach researchers should provide practitioners with a solid grounding in the ethics and protocols of data collection and treatment to ensure the integrity and validity of coaching research. At a minimum, practitioners would have the skills to read and use research literature and to set up and use reflective coaching research practices. Coach researchers also need access to a collegial community of experienced colleagues who can provide mentoring and technical support, enabling less experienced practitioners to work through challenges of research design or execution. A deliberate developmental education for coach researchers would provide educators who are able to "join a person in the experiences of making meaning rather than ... (in) their made meaning" (Kegan, 1982, p 274). Such a mentor would accompany the coach researcher in her own development by being a helpful part of the process (Kegan, 1982). A recognized coaching research community would support, promote and encourage both reflective practice and contribution to the field of coaching studies and reinforce these elements as an integral part of a professional coaching identity.

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