



# Reflections of a Coaching Psychologist

## Hindsight on GROWTH:

### A few reflections triggered by a recent learning experience

Mary Watts, City University, London, UK.

#### Abstract

*In summary, I've thought a lot, I've done a lot, I've drawn certain conclusions but I still have a lot to figure out and learn.*

*In this paper I focus on three key areas of recent personal learning and reflection as it relates to coaching and coaching psychology: firstly, the use of goals, objectives and learning outcomes; secondly the use and further development of the GROW model; and thirdly, the development and application of theory and research. There are many more but these stand out as headlines and ones that I want to capture now as markers that I can reflect back on as I progress my learning and experience in these areas.*

*Keywords: coaching, learning, reflection, grow, growth, goals, personal learning, objectives, learning outcomes, theory, research, personal meaning, constructions*

Let me first provide a context for this learning and reflection. I recently successfully completed a coaching programme. It lasted one year, was accredited by the World Association of Business Coaches and combined theory, practice and an appreciation of research. I started the programme as an already experienced academic and applied psychologist specialising in psychotherapy, counselling and health psychology but for the previous 10 years I had been working primarily as an academic leader, as a pro vice chancellor firstly in learning and teaching and then in health. I had found myself moving in a very different world with a major focus on strategy, planning, leadership, budgets and management. Interestingly my psychology became indispensable to my survival and success and coaching psychology became a natural home for me as I sought to lead change across the University. As I planned ahead towards the end of my University leadership career I had the opportunity to study coaching and coaching psychology more formally. I became a student again and loved every minute of it. I submitted course work, I undertook supervised practice and I engaged in active coaching under supervision. For many years I had supervised and tutored psychology students through similar experiences in counselling and health psychology and I decided it was time to treat myself to the ups and downs of such an experience.

In this paper I share three particular areas of interest and reflection triggered by the course. The development of the areas is not complete as you will see as you read on but I anticipate that these areas will provide a spring board for

future work, some of which is already underway as I write this paper.

**Area one** relates to the use of objectives in the context of learning. Until relatively recently little attention was given to making these explicit. Broad objectives may have been set by programme planners and learners may have had a number of personal implicit or explicit objectives for attending a programme of learning. Over the last 10 years or so, however, there has been a revolution relating to objectives and learning outcomes. Programmes are closely scrutinized by an increasing number of external quality and validating bodies, all expecting clarity and evidence of achievement in particular areas.

In my recent role as Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching I took a leadership role in promoting the use of programme objectives and learning outcomes. Increasingly, however, I have become uneasy at the frequently rigid and black and white approach to their use and worried about the impact on students' learning. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that I should now be reflecting on this aspect of my recent learning experience.

The course handbook contained information on each of the tutorial topics including a brief but broad list of learning outcomes. They were short and relevant to my learning but the specific form of their application to my personal learning was left open. I did not feel constrained but assisted and empowered as a learner.

In addition to the above, each individual was required to produce their own personal performance goals and learning outcomes. My learning from this part of my experience relates directly to my thoughts on coaching. I drew up a list of goals and then attempted to identify learning success measures at a personal and organizational level.

A short way into the programme my goals and learning outcomes started to change. I tried to capture them again but I discovered how illusive they were. As I changed through my learning so did they. Fortunately for me the programme gave me the space for this to happen. The key learning point for me is that when we start on a true journey of personal learning we don't know exactly where that journey will take us. The critical questions for me are, 'are we open or closed to the journey being an exciting adventure?' and 'how can we ensure that the use of goals and objectives empowers and does not kill the spirit of adventure?' In fact I would go a stage further and say how can we nurture and support a type of learning that safely and effectively challenges the learner's ideas, practices and even self concept? This question is relevant to education in its broadest sense, has particular relevance to adult education and is critical within the context of professional education and practice. When looked at in the context of coaching we have an ethical and practical responsibility which relates to our client's learning, whether it is in the area of skills learning, cognitive development or personal insight. We also have a responsibility to consider with our client the possible impact of their learning on themselves and others, including their place of work where appropriate.

In summary, I can say that my experience has been positive in regard to the use of goals and learning objectives and their impact on my learning. However, for me at least, more work needs to be done in regard to their role in coaching.

**Area two** relates directly to the issues above and to the use of the GROW model.

During my studies GROW (Whitmore, 2002) was used as the core coaching practice model, at least for the duration of the programme. Programme participants were required to become competent in its application in client work. To become competent in the use of one model is sound and I appreciate the opportunity I was given to do this. However, very early on both strengths and limitations of the GROW model became apparent to me. The notion of identifying **Goals** with an individual is comfortable for me, as is spending time on unravelling current and where appropriate, past **Realities**. The notion of identifying and considering carefully a range of **Options** before selecting and acting is equally comfortable, and the client choosing **What** to do and having the **Will** to do it are equally sound ideas. My musings are around the subtlety of the application of the

model in practice and also some gaps in it. I'll start with the former as a good model does not ensure good coaching.

My first interest relates to the use of client Goals and in the same way that I surmised above that the poor use of learning objectives and outcomes can inhibit learning and change, logic tells me the same applies to goals in coaching. The timing and approach to eliciting them would seem important, as does the capacity to reflect on and change them. I recall as a therapist a client who came for treatment with the clear goal of overcoming her agoraphobia. Careful assessment, which included an element akin to the Reality elements of GROW, was followed by hypotheses relating to the maintenance and change of the unwanted lifestyle. Together these indicated that the client could indeed work towards the goal of being non agoraphobic. But there was a strong possibility that in the process of doing this, very particular and considerable strain could be put on her marriage which may as a consequence not survive. In this particular case, following a period of reflection, the client decided not to have therapy at that time.

This memory has led me to consider very carefully my client's proposed goals, the possible side effects and consequences of coaching interventions and to share these with my client. Therapy goals and coaching goals may be different but they each have the capacity to elicit consequences, some welcome and some unwelcome.

The Reality element of GROW I found fascinating to ponder and touch on only a few points in this paper. One is that I suspect that this is where coaching has something to offer the therapeutic world and vice versa. Eliciting *reality* requires the use of strong interpersonal skills, the capacity to listen and to stand in another's shoes. There are many different levels and types of reality that can be elicited, including those that appear obvious and clear to the client. However, there are many different perspectives to reality including for example that of the boss, the co-worker the partner and so on. Difficulties frequently emerge from a lack of a shared reality. Often difficult to ascertain are those factors which maintain a reality or enable it to change. Also difficult to ascertain is the degree to which beliefs contribute to a 'false' or unrealistic reality. My earlier study and practice in psychology has led me to be extremely mindful of an individual's personal construing of a situation, shared and group construing and the possible impact of these on behaviour, change and learning. During my programme of study I experimented with the development of a negotiation model in which a GROWTH model was populated and shared simultaneously by the two main protagonists in the negotiation, thus allowing for the recognition and understanding of the differing perspectives of the negotiators.

It could be considered that the level of thought I'm contemplating in relation to determining the goals and realities of an individual in coaching is way too complex. In many cases this may well be the case, for example, where the coaching is for simple skills development or behaviour change. Very often, however, this is not the case if second order, lasting, learning and change are required. For example, if success in coaching depends on the individual developing the capacity to be their own coach and a coach manager of others, a more sophisticated understanding of self and self in relation to others is required. This could be construed as working to advance an individual's emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996, Rudd 2010) to support transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 2007). At a personal level I am working to integrate these ideas into a more coherent approach to coaching assessment. It is also an area that my reading so far suggests has considerable scope for further development.

Moving now to Options – these are an important part of coaching practice but can only be as sound as the earlier discussion of Goals and Reality enables them to be. Likewise, deciding What to do and having the Will to do it will be seriously impacted by the quality of the work relating to goals and reality.

Earlier in this paper I referred to some gaps that I perceived in the GROW model. These relate explicitly to the lack of an element for Tracking progress and also for addressing the need for Hindsight or critical reflection and associated learning. I therefore use my own GROWTH model when coaching. In my experience lasting change and learning can only occur where Tracking and Hindsight occur. Stopping at the point of knowing what you want to do and having the will to do it is not enough. It is important to know whether change is occurring, what that change is and what impact it is having, both on the client and significant others. There is also an ethical element to this. As coaches it is important that we know whether our coaching is, in fact, making a situation worse. In the same way that it is possible to make a phobic patient more anxious and phobic through the poor application of a desensitization programme, it is also possible to engage in coaching that has unintended negative consequences for the client.

Tracking is critical for the client with whom we are working but it is also critical for the development of coaching as an effective area of professional practice. Without careful Tracking we can have no meaningful case studies which can be used to advance knowledge of coaching. More formal coaching research also requires the use of coaching data which may frequently be obtained through the imaginative use of Tracking. Tracking is vital following action but can be actively used at any stage of the coaching, to track changes in goals, for example, or the relationship between goals and changes in perceptions of reality.

My personal experience is that learning through Hindsight and reflection has a particular relevance at the end of a coaching experience and can result in learning on the part of the coach and the coached. Some of this learning will be shared and other elements very individualised. However, Hindsight can be applied at numerous stages of coaching. For example, there is potential for learning and increased understanding following each coaching session. The nature of this will impact on the direction that subsequent sessions take.

The way that I have presented GROWTH perhaps makes it appear as a linear model but my experience so far is that I am more comfortable using it in a circular way, applying a mind mapping approach (Buzan, 2004) to each of the elements and starting at the point that the client seems most comfortable starting. This may be with goals but can also be at any other point. I am currently attempting to develop a collaborative and effective approach to moving between the elements of GROWTH in a way that best benefits the client. Furthering my understanding of the dynamics involved in this could be achieved through ongoing analysis of client work, and the creation and sharing of case studies and process reports.

**Area three** relates to the development and application of theory and research to practice and vice versa (Jarvis, 1992, 1999, 2006). This links to the ideas above, particularly the Hindsight and Tracking elements. Coaching practice data, both qualitative and quantitative, is critical for the development of theory and research and in turn theory and research should feed back into practice.

I'm very mindful that the effectiveness of my coaching is likely to be impacted by the effective application or otherwise of coaching relevant theory and research. Psychology as a discipline has a key role to play and in particular the relatively recent focus on positive psychology (Linley & Kaufman, 2007). Although there is a strong case for engaging in more research and theory development, there is also a need for greater mindfulness in regard to current theory and research and their relevance to coaching practice. I have a particular interest in George Kelly's theory which he calls 'the psychology of personal constructs' and its potential application to coaching and coaching research.

Kelly was concerned with personal meaning, which he suggested 'should prove no less valuable to the scientist than it is to the psychotherapist' (Kelly, 1969a, p.74), and I would add here, 'or to the coach'. According to Kelly each person holds a representational model of the world which enables them to chart a course of behaviour in relation to that model. Kelly believed that if we never alter our constructions all that occurs is a sequence of parallel events which have no psychological impact. I'm concerned that my clients do not engage in a 'sequence of parallel

events' and that meaningful learning and change occurs. My interest now is in seeking to weave ideas from positive psychology, from personal construct psychology and from coaching, into a meaningful whole that has relevance for practice and practice research.

So with my three key areas of learning and reflection articulated and the enthusiasm to continue my personal GROWTH and learning, it is perhaps apposite to end with a quote from George Kelly:

*This paper throughout deals with half-truths only. Nothing that it contains is, or is intended to be wholly true. The theoretical statements propounded are no more than partially accurate constructions of events which, in turn, are no more than partially perceived.*  
(Kelly, 1969a p.66)

## References

- Buzan, T. (2004). *Mind maps at work*, Thorsons, Harper Collins Pub. Ltd. London
- Cranton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning*. (2<sup>nd</sup>ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotional Intelligence* London: Bloomsbury
- Jarvis, P. (1992). *Paradoxes of Learning* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Jarvis, P. (1999). *The Practitioner Researcher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jarvis, P. (2006). *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*, Routledge, London & New York.
- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (2 Vols.). New York: Norton.
- Linley, P.A. & Kaufman, C. (2007). *International Coaching Psychology Review*, Vol. 2 NO 1 March 2007. Special issue, Positive Psychology. The Australian Psychological Society Ltd. & the British Psychological Society, Leicester.
- Rudd, B. (2010) *EQ - Connecting Heart With Mind* Milton Keynes: SpeechMark Taylor, E. W. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999-2005). *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26, 173-191.
- Whitmore, J. (2002). *Coaching for performance* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). London: Nicholas Brealey.

## Biography:

Mary Watts is Emeritus Professor at City University, London and formerly held the roles of Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning and Dean of the School of Community and Health Sciences at City. She is a Chartered Psychologist specialising in counselling, health and coaching psychology and Senior Accredited Psychotherapist with the British Psychological Society. She has many years experience of developing and teaching university based courses and her research and practice reflects a particular interest in professional education.

Mary's current work focuses on the application of coaching psychology to the development and learning of individuals and teams, in particular within the context of senior leadership and organisational change.

*Mary is a graduate from the Meyler Campbell Business Coaching Programme (London, UK). This article is based on work she submitted during this Programme.*

## Correspondence:

Professor Mary Watts C.Psychol  
City University, London  
Northampton Square  
London EC1V OHB  
Email [mary.h.watts@city.ac.uk](mailto:mary.h.watts@city.ac.uk)