

Structured interventions in coaching: Theory-based ‘seeding’ as a coaching practice and learning paradigm

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Abstract

This study takes a preliminary look at the use of explicit structures (seeds), such as theoretical models, as a way of facilitating the coaching engagement in general and specific client outcomes in particular. Using Heuristic Inquiry, the study examines the coach and client experiences that accompany the use of seeding. It attempts to identify common themes and outcomes associated with seeding as well as to provide a possible theoretical underpinning. Anecdotal evidence suggests that structured interventions can facilitate client learning, simplify and standardise reference frames, language and meaning in coaching conversations and provide a guide for the exploration and organisation of client experience towards realising the clients desired outcomes. Set against a backdrop of limited research and active coaching debates, the investigation examines client and coach experience, practice and attitudes and explores the diverse theory and literature that illuminate ‘seeding’, its nature, and possible implications for coaching theory and practice.

Key Words: coaching, seeding, model-dependent reality, coaching psychology

Introduction

I have encountered a phenomenon in coaching both as coach and client, that happens sometimes when the coach introduces an appropriate and timely structured idea, or ‘seed’ to the conversation that has the effect of catalysing new understanding and awareness from a sometimes vast, often nebulous or confusing body of client experience in a short period of time. Outcomes of seeding for clients often include; enabling the client to rapidly reorganise their own experience, contextualise their thoughts, feelings and behaviours in new ways and gain insight into those of others, enabling completely new vistas of insight to open up. For the coaching conversation several effects are common including; a standardising of the frames of reference, the language that is used to communicate and manipulate the content of the coaching conversation and simplifying meaning, providing a basis for potentially extensive ongoing exploration both within the coaching context and outside of it.

This study is interested in examining the experience of seeding in service of the idea that it may be a useful, though apparently largely unrecognised, and powerful coaching practice and learning paradigm. The substance of the practice is identified and support and precedent is sought in the literature in order to describe its contours and application in coaching. The fit and alignment of the concept of seeding with other established coaching principles such as the notions of the ‘resourceful client’ e.g. (Rogers, 2008) and the ‘non-directive’ coach e.g. (Bluckert, 2006).

The paper aims to inform the reader of the phenomenon of seeding, describe its characteristics, point to some impact it might have with the current state of the coaching art, science and literature, to

propose a possible theoretical base, and to provide a discussion point for practice and possible further study.

What is “Seeding”?

‘Seeding’ as a metaphor comes from the ‘seed crystals’ and supersaturated solutions we experimented with in the chemistry lab at high school. Briefly, the metaphor is that we (the water) navigate life, gain experience and learn through it (adding a salt to the water) as we go. If we are unable to assimilate the incoming experience, super-saturation (along with heat / pressure or stress) can occur. The supersaturated solution can remain in this thermodynamically unstable state at room temperature indefinitely. For people, this is the mess of disorganised experience and the inability to make sufficient meaning from it to be useful and meet our needs, can be the source of frustration, stress and confusion, which is what brings us to coaching.

At the introduction of the smallest piece of structure – typically a seed crystal – the dissolved salts spontaneously come out of solution and begin to take their stable crystalline form around the tiny seed. In a matter of seconds, the crystallisation process transforms the shapeless content of the solution, into a highly-ordered crystalline structure. For coaching clients, this can amount to a revolution in meaning-making, as some examples in this research demonstrate, along with a profound release from the tension of being lost in formless and insufficiently meaningful experience.

Just as with the super-saturated solution, the seed in a coaching conversation does not cause a reaction, or react with the solution in any way. Its sole function is to provide the initial pattern for the dissolved salts to follow. The role of the seed is therefore not to impose order, but to enable a potentially more helpful order, already inherent, to reveal itself. The seed is not the content of the conversation or the cause of the change, but merely a structured model or frame around which the clients’ content can find an inherently more ordered state.

Methodology

Heuristic Inquiry was the methodology chosen for this research based on several factors, most important of which was its ability to address the first-person phenomenological experience of seeding both from the client and the coach’s perspectives. As well as wanting to explore seeding in its visceral form and I wanted results from the research that would contribute to the coaching profession both at a theoretical and pragmatic level. To this end, and following guidelines in Creswell (2013); Creswell et al. (2007), I framed Heuristic Inquiry using an AQAL (All Quadrants, All Levels) integral lens (Wilber, 2001), so that the subjective (to be accessed through Heuristic Inquiry) would also be accompanied by data and influence from the other 3 quadrants (the behavioural/scientific/objective, the cultural/intersubjective, and the social/political/systemic). This was done, not to modify the methodology itself, but to better enable the delivery on the pragmatic aspirations of the research as well as deal with some of the more common criticisms of Heuristic Inquiry e.g. (Sela-Smith). Only the AQAL quadrants were used; levels, lines, states and types were not used in the framing on this occasion for simplicities sake, but could produce some valuable insights in a further study.

Two groups of co-researchers were recruited, one cohort of executives (coded ‘ER’) who would receive ‘normal’ executive coaching, with the understanding that if an opportunity to ‘seed’ presented itself that I would use it, without forewarning the client and then, at a later point (usually in feedback sessions conducted some time later and at the end of the research) review what had been significant for them in the sessions. These conversations reviewed the client experience while looking for any experiences attributed to the seeding occasions. The second cohort was a group of 6 coaches (coded

‘CR’) who agreed to share their experiences related to seeding, describe any occasions on which it had occurred and what, if any role it had in their practice.

Recruitment of potential ER participants was done using an email invitation describing the research scope and goals and possible benefits of participating. The invitation was sent through other peoples’ networks to ensure that I did not know any of the participants. In each case, contracting formed part of the initial engagement in which the research project was explained in person following up on the invitation material sent out to each co-researcher, ethical considerations, the format of the coaching, objectives of the client and those of the researcher were shared and discussed with any initial questions or reservations being discussed and parameters agreed upon. Each ER received no less than 6 x 90-120 minute coaching sessions (64 hours of coaching conversations in total) including feedback sessions. Each ER coaching conversation was recorded and transcribed as appropriate to the research. Recordings were then listened to several times over in line with Moustakas’ (1990) injunction to become ‘immersed’ in the material. During this process notes were taken and iterations of analysis performed, themes identified with both personal and composite depictions emerging from both cohorts of co-researchers.

The CR cohort was invited to contribute to the research and recruited through my professional network. No specific selection or qualification criteria were used, and a broad range of specialities and backgrounds is represented in the cohort. The coach co-researcher cohort participated in semi-structured interviews based on Bevan’s (2014) method for conducting phenomenological interviews. Most CRs gave one interview, typically lasting at least two hours. Some CR’s contributed further in follow-up conversations to embellish, expand or clarify certain items that came up during the process of following the Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) methodology. In total, about 14.5 hours of interviews were held, recorded and completely transcribed for the purposes of the research. In addition, personal profiles intended to accurately represent the essence of the coach, based on their interviews were written and submitted to the CRs to evaluate and correct as they felt was necessary. These were all approved by the CRs before use. This method of returning to the material again and again and checking the accuracy of the depictions with the co-researchers is consistent with both Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) and helps to establish the ‘horizon’ (Bevan, 2014) or Husserlian (1970) ‘lifeworld’ and ‘natural attitude’ of the co-researcher, facilitating better hermeneutic understanding of their contributions.

Moustakas’ (1990) 6-step method (Identification, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication and Creative Synthesis) was used to guide the research. Some modifications and deviations were necessary to comply mainly with time, but also co-researcher access constraints. The main impact of these modifications were that the research was bound by ‘clock time’ (Moustakas, 1990).

Code	Role	M/F	Ethnicity
CR1	Experienced leader in education and specialist dyslexia coach	F	White British
CR2	Ex business executive and business coach	F	White British
CR3	OD consultant and peak performance coach	M	White British
CR4	Business manager and coach	F	White British

CR5	Chartered accountant and executive coach	M	White British
CR6	Psychotherapist, lecturer and coach	M	White British
ER1	Programme Manager – Tier 1 Defence Contractor	M	White British
ER2	Senior VP - HR Generalist, Global Risk and Global Marketing and Corporate Affairs – Investment Banking	M	White British
ER3	Senior VP - Regional Security Director – Investment Banking	M	White British
ER4	Director – Capital Market Risk – Investment Banking	F	White Italian
ER5	Senior manager – Learning, O.D. – Investment Banking	F	White British
ER6	Manager – Designer Fashion	F	White Portuguese

Table 1 - Co-researchers

Moustakas (1990) contends that Heuristic Inquiry should be completely unbound by time and other constraints, for him, it is more important that the researcher and the researched, each acting upon the other, to come to a natural sense of completion. For example he says:

The heuristic research process is not one that can be hurried or timed by the clock or calendar. It demands the total presence, honesty, maturity, and integrity of a researcher who not only strongly desires to know and understand but is willing to commit endless hours of sustained immersion and focused concentration on one central question, to risk the opening of wounds and passionate concerns, and to undergo the personal transformation that exists as a possibility in every heuristic journey. (Moustakas, 1990 p. 8)

Adhering to the letter of the methodology was not possible in this study; however, the spirit of this view was fundamental to the project. For example, as Moustakas (1990), Sela-Smith (2002), Hiles (2002) and others discuss, there is something like a surrender to the question, or a ‘free-fall’ in Sela-Smith’s (2002) words, that is a) required of the researcher to fully engage with the question and the data and b) something in which there is no resistance on the part of the researcher to the effects, whatever they might be – the transformative component of the material on the researcher such that the “answers” to the question, don’t arise “out there” as is the case in empirical science, but are found “in here” as they emerge within the researcher. This was achieved in part within the constraints of the study.

A second area of impact was that some of the methodological steps were run in parallel and were often iterative, which is not necessarily congruent with the more discrete and serial view of the methodology (Moustakas (1990). Impacts like these are not unusual in Heuristic Inquiry research projects and Sela-Smith (2002) for example, lists these and other common deviations present in the vast majority of Heuristic Inquiry research.

Literature Review

Seeding as a concept, and by any other name, such as “construct”, “structure”, “map” or “model”, only makes rare appearances in the coaching, psychology, scientific, philosophical and even spiritual literature. Where literature does address seeding directly, it does so in isolated, individual applications which vary dramatically. Seeding fills different roles in practice, is conceived diversely and there is no consistency in the terminology used between one author and another. Despite there being very little coverage or unified understanding for the practice or concept of seeding, as will be discussed below in the findings chapter, there is some evidence that it occurs quite widely in coaching practice. An overview of the supportive literature is given first for the reason that, while it doesn't directly address the practice of seeding, it has important conceptual similarities with it that will hopefully offer a frame of seeding amongst a broader literature base.

Supportive Literature

Central supportive literature is found in Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory (PCT) (alternatively Personal Construct Psychology (PCP)), in which we, as ‘man the scientist’ go about making sense of ourselves, others and the world around us – noticing patterns from events and experiences and constructing models (personal theories) for use in dealing with them. Constructs that are useful are reinforced, while those that are not are discarded or modified. Seeds are nothing more than constructs in the sense that Kelly (1955) identifies them. In the model of the world that PCP suggests, all of our mental functioning is determined by these personal constructions and the systems that they form when taken collectively. Hawking (2011), using a different frame, calls this ‘model-dependent realism’ i.e. what we know about the world is dependent (defined and limited by) the models we use to explore it.

In addition, PCP (Kelly, 1955) is imminently compatible with developmental theories, in that constructs, or ways of construing the world, and the systems that they constitute, are studied as waves of emergence by developmental psychologists, such as Kegan (1982) who takes a cognitive view, Kohlberg (1981) who takes a moral one, Graves (1970) or the more recent Beck and Cowan (2005) who take a values perspective on development. Though developmental aspects of seeding in the research are not explicitly explored, they are nevertheless evident in some of the seeding occasions that came up, and I believe will play an important role in any complete view of seeding.

Lastly, semiotic mediators in theoretical psychology give insight into the possible dynamics involved in change in general, but seem to say something important about catalytic change in particular, the kind of change experiences that drove my initial interest in studying seeding. Cabell (2010); Cabell and Valsiner (2011); de Mattos and Chaves (2013); Salvatore and Valsiner (2014) and others, theorise about how we manage our systems of thinking, what being stuck looks like, what is needed and what is happening when change happens and what conditions are needed for these processes to operate. Simply put, they suggest that at any given moment there are dynamic psychological processes that mediate (govern) our ways of thinking, both in maintaining a current state and also the processes of change.

“Semiotic mediators are of two kinds—semiotic regulators and semiotic catalyzers. Semiotic catalyzers provide the conditions necessary for the operation and employment of semiotic regulators. Semiotic regulators actively and directly act on ongoing psychological processes through inhibiting or promoting their continuation and development. The concept of the catalyst is useful in demonstrating how semiotic regulators succeed (or fail) in charting out new trajectories in human development.” (Cabell, 2010 p.26)

In this model, an item of change needs to overcome the prevailing inhibiting regulators that are concerned with the maintenance of the status quo, something that is a normal and common process. Promoting regulators introducing new constructs (change) if they can overcome any inhibiting regulators which maintain the status quo, can realise change for the individual. Catalysers are important in this dynamic as they provide the conditions for the promoting regulators to overcome inhibiting regulators without themselves becoming involved in the balance. Catalysers are then the semiotic mediators that provide the conditions for change, or as Kelly (1955) notes, they may provide the ‘major act of psychotherapy or experience’ to enable a shift to happen for someone who is stuck. In coaching obviously we are more concerned with a ‘major experience’ rather than psychotherapy. There is extensive development of how these processes unfold, however it is sufficient for now to consider seeding as not only a type of personal construct, but also as a type of semiotic catalyser. The similarity of seeds, not only to constructs (Kelly, 1955) but also as catalysers (Cabell, 2010) etc. is remarkable. Seeds, like catalysers are largely content free – i.e. they have no meaning on their own – they are simply structured ways of organising pre-existing personal experience.

Direct literature

Following on from the personal constructs and individual change dynamics considered above, Aiken Hodge (2009) in her DProf thesis is attempting to enable a semiotic shift in a corporate cultural setting. She explicitly uses a seeding strategy to ‘unsettle’ existing semiotic paradigms that inhibit the development of the ‘transformed, co-created organisational culture’ (ibid, p. 47) that the organisation sees as necessary to its wellbeing. Specifically:

*The coaching method attempts to reposition taken-for-granted meanings by ‘seeding’ the (coaching) discourse with other possible interpretations that unsettle its embedded – **sedimented** - meanings. (Aiken Hodge, 2009 P: 47) Emphasis in original*

The ‘coaching method’ being referred to here, is based on Wilber’s (2005) Integral Operating System, and seeding is a method of introducing new developmental structures to her clients. For Aiken Hodge (2009) this unsettling, introduces an opportunity for the client to see that there is embedded meaning in operation, however uncritically accepted it may be, and introduces the idea that other possible cultural frames (Lotman’s (2000) semiospheres) could be considered to enable a corporate cultural objective. Seeding in this conception is one component of an overall integral coaching method and is being employed to encourage transformative change. Here “transformational” is the qualitative move from one developmental stage or level, e.g. Kegan’s (1982) ‘orders of mind’ to another, what Cook-Greuter (2005) refers to as ‘vertical’ development. This could include both sudden and gradual transformations (Mezirow, 1981). The aim of her coaching in general and seeding in particular is to move employees up the developmental stack to overcome or transcend the cultural differences that are seen to be problematic in their current state.

The approach taken by Aiken Hodge (2009) in this case is driven by an organisational need, and all those receiving coaching are being coached on potentially more helpful new ways of being. This would raise some important questions about client-centric principles for instance – to what extent is coaching about the clients’ agenda and the companies’ agenda? - that is at the heart of coaching (Kimsey-House et al. (2011); Stober and Grant (2006); Whitmore (1996). Can coaching ethically be used to direct thinking and ways of being to suit corporate needs as noble or well intentioned as the may be?

Kinsella (2012), by contrast, uses seeding to work with students online. He describes his seeding practice as a kind of ‘fishing’. In this practice, he is ‘Looking for important development ideas and opportunities’ (ibid, P: vii). His use of a ‘range of ‘baited hooks’ is designed to detect and elicit

interest from his students around which he can create a ‘development episode’ – an opening to engage with the student, where learning can occur. For Kinsella (2012 p. vii) his ‘fishing / seeding’ is ‘not a wholly rational or explicit intellectual process...’ but rather it is similar to ‘a tacit activity where through an embodied ‘intuitive inferencing’ process...’ he practises seeding. Kinsella (2012) employs seeding as an exploratory tool, one that has no particular end in mind apart from its relevance to the student and their situation in the moment. He is actively looking for learning opportunities, and using seeding to flush them out.

In contrast to the catalytic metaphor that attracted my interest in seeding and to both Kinsella (2012) and Aiken Hodge (2009) just discussed, several authors refer to seeding in the organic sense of the word. In this conception, seeding is analogous to a growing organism like a plant. Howell (2009) for example, views each human self and the emergence of the human race as a whole as organic processes unfolding over many years. The role for coaching is to nurture a seed planted in any one of what Howell (2009) sees as the three phases of the soul (child, adolescent and adult) so that it grows into the next, more mature phase - By ‘developing our awareness of the whole sequence of self [...] we can avoid limiting what we do and what we think we can do!’ (2009, p. 60).

Despite the contrast in conceptions between catalytic and organic, and between the individual conceptions explored above, what each has in common is that each seeks to begin a process of change in a lesser developed state and through coaching, transform it into a realisation at a more developed state. Thus far seeding has formed a part of individual coaching methods and though it may have an important role, there are no examples yet of seeding as a systematised, or methodological approach. Borie and Eckstein (2006) include seeding in their apparently highly methodical approach “Integrity-Based Leadership Coaching (IBLC)”. Borie and Eksteen (2006 p.74) take the view that

Much of our identity and identification process is made up of incremental cognitive assemblages formed over a lifetime. In order to affect true change, those that are assessed to be detrimental must be deconstructed and then reconstructed with healthy alternatives.

Clear compatibilities with Kelly (1955) are visible in this approach, ‘cognitive assemblages’ are synonymous with Kelly’s (1955) ‘personal constructs’. In addition, Borie and Eckstein (2006) acknowledge the same requirements for change that are found in PCT using slightly different language. For these authors, this change process includes ‘seeding questions’ which are a system of enquiry-based solutions designed to open up alternative ways of thinking. Here there is an explicit commonality with Aiken Hodge (2009) as both attempt to contrast existing and possibly suboptimal constructs / assemblages with alternatives so that the client can a) become aware that they are ‘embedded’ in one system of making meaning (Kegan, 1982) and b) that a more effective means of making meaning not only might exist, but could possibly be offered in the form of a structured seed model / map / construct. Seeding in the catalytic conceptions above clearly uses the idea of seeds to provide a nucleation point around which new structures can emerge, the introduction of which seems to bring with it new insight or the ability to fashion learning conversations based on the clients’ response. In the case of Borie and Eckstein (2006) the seed is not given by the coach in the same way as Aiken Hodge (2009) or Kinsella (2012), it is rather framed as a question designed to invite new structure from within the clients existing frames of reference and resources. This appears to me like a photographic negative requiring processing by the client, whereas a seed introduced by the coach is already preformed in some way.

While Aiken Hodge’s (2009) seeding programme was based on an organisations’ needs, Borie and Eckstein (2006) seem to have organised seeding into a reusable, systematic model in their coaching methodology. In Aiken Hodge’s (2009) case it’s more likely that her seeding was developed for the one client with specific needs, however Borie and Eckstein (2006) propose a coaching model

that would presumably be repeatable in various contexts and thus portable between clients. Borie and Eckstein (2006) also espouse an incremental approach, although it is not explicitly stated in their description of their model, the sense I get is that they take a longer term, client-paced and organic approach to their coaching model. Organic here, might be better described as "natural" or naturally-paced because it differs from the organic view taken by Bowell (2009) for example.

In conclusion, there do appear to be some aspects uncovered here that stand out. Firstly, the idea that a seed can be almost any structured idea, whether it has a theoretical background e.g. Aiken Hodge (2009) or not e.g. Bowell (2009). In either case, there are claims that they produce positive outcomes. Secondly, it seems clear that the role seeding plays with these various conceptions varies too – some are comparatively ad-hoc, used as-and-when they're needed e.g. Kinsella (2012), while others form a defined and permanent part the overall method e.g. Borie and Eckstein (2006). Third, it seems to me that some seeding approaches are designed to elicit change from within the client using their own resources and experience, e.g. Borie and Eckstein (2006) which constitutes an *inside-out* (Bluckert, 2006; O'Neill, 2000) approach, whereas other approaches propose a possible structure for change e.g. Aiken Hodge (2009), which is more of an *outside-in* approach. Both approaches have the same outcome in mind (and arguably achieve them) – desired change for the client – but take different paths to it. These 'different paths' are not without some controversy, ongoing debates regarding directivity on the part of coaches and the resourcefulness of clients are key among them. The impact of seeding on these and other debates is discussed in more detail in the findings chapter.

At this point, it may appear as if there are many loose ends – trains of thought or methods of practice that, although sharing some commonality also do not appear to cohere sufficiently well. If this was to be accomplished to a satisfactory degree, it would likely need dedicated attention of its own – something that would not be feasible or well-placed in this paper. A slightly more comprehensive, but still preliminary attempt can be found in Wood (2014).

Findings

Findings are presented here in themes uncovered through the research. Heuristic Inquiry is concerned with the 'nature and meaning of experience' (Moustakas, 1990 p. 9), a concern centred on the individual - Moustakas is at pains to emphasise the ideal that the individual should not be lost within the data or process of research, to the contrary, Heuristic Research should be intensely personal. Once this is accomplished, a condition given for good research is that outcomes should have 'social relevance' (Moustakas, 1990 p.53). This does not suggest that findings should be universal or generalisable, however, they should still have relevance for others. The method for deriving the essence of experience, and the associated meaning is achieved through 'individual depictions' – examples that detail personal experience, and 'composite depictions' – those that combine several examples of experience in a more complete way. The themes that follow present and discuss seeding conceptions, categories of experience for clients and coaches and the coaching processes that seem to be associated with successful outcomes that coaches and clients report.

Diversity of Seeding Practice

The diverse ways of interpreting and practising seeding that became evident in the literature review are found in similar diversity in the research data. This diversity is found both in the practice of the coaches interviewed and the different seeding approaches experimented with while coaching the six client co-researchers.

Conceptions and Roles of Seeding: *Among the CR cohort, only CR1 sees no role for seeding in coaching. Change for this coach is an unconscious process and doesn't involve seeding. For her:*

... change happens at the level of the unconscious in NLP terms. So the ultimate is to enter into the other person's map of the world and bring about change at the unconscious level, or enable them to bring about change at their own unconscious level. What you're doing if you go into the kind of theoretical side (presenting seeds or models etc.), then you're working very much with the analytical / conscious part (of the person) and I don't have a problem with that, I just don't call it coaching (CR1)

The most common role of seeding is **situational** (3 of 6 - CR2, CR4, CR6); CR4 describes this role for seeding in her practice:

I don't go out to do this (seeding) purposefully [...] I've got this box of things in my head I can pull out if necessary and appropriate, [...] it's a client by client, situation by situation basis (CR4).

The **situational** role was also the most common role for seeding in the ER cohort (3 of 6 - ER1, ER4, ER5). Though no CR coaches describe **expansive/exploratory** roles for seeding in their practice, I was able to successfully use this type of strategy in one session with ER2 in a free-flowing seeding experiment (the ER requested we try this, and I was interested to see what would happen). In a similar way to Kinsella (2012), I used seeds as 'baited hooks' and looked for a response from the client upon which to organise the discussion. He later said that this session yielded his most valuable outcomes:

'Out of all of them (coaching sessions) that one (experimental seeding discussion) 'was the most valuable without a doubt'. (ER2)

This session, where seeds were drawn up on a whiteboard and discussed in light of his situation, was the one that produced 'lightbulb moments' for him.

the [...] stuff you wrote up on the board made things a lot more tangible – I thought "I get that, that's really interesting" [...] they are really impactful because it makes you look at things slightly differently. (CR2)

The coaches with a **foundational** role for seeding tend also to show a strong tendency to use theoretical seeds. CR3 has a strong O.D. background and, by contrast, sees the use of models as central to his practice. He takes a direct and explicit approach to seeding, where the path to enabling the clients' goals is described in terms of a series of models. He 'teaches the model' and then coaches on the implementation. For him, these are not separate things, but one continuum for enabling learning. He claims that his model-based methodology is 'content and context free', and that the content and context for the models comes from the client. This depiction is the most overt use of seeding and seeding-like practice found in this research.

'For me the explicit use of models (which includes seeding) is to say, if people either don't know what their models are, or if [...] they're useful or not, [...] why not give them a map? And say, "if you've not got a map or your map doesn't work, here's a map...' Explain the map to them, so you're "map reading", and then get them to try it out and see whether it works for them or not. (CR3)

In this research, seeding has a place in almost every coach co-researchers practice (5 of 6 CRs already use seeding in some form). Though it is not possible to generalise these numbers into the wider profession with any precision, it suggests that seeding is probably not a rare practice in the coaching community. Each coach who had used seeding, independent of their conception of it reports that it produces positive client outcomes. No negative outcomes or experiences were reported by the CRs in this research group, and none were encountered in the ER coaching sessions, however there

are common reports of occasions when nothing happens – instances where a seed is offered that has no discernible effect. The ER cohort expressed a preference for more overt and interactive approaches to their learning, ER1, ER2 ER3 and ER5 all valued, sometimes inviting, an explicit and context-appropriate approach to the coaching conversation, though this might have been influenced by interest in the research.

In addition to the extremes encountered above in CR1 and CR3, the remainder of the CR cohort use seeding in the situational context. There is no formal strategy to use seeding and often no pre-conceived idea that it might be useful. For these coaches, the practice seems to be one best described as spontaneous. With the possible exception of CR3 (and excluding CR1) seeding, forms a part of the coaching practice of the CR cohort. Most use seeding blended in with more common ask-based approaches. Reasoning is varied, e.g. CR2 sees a place for ask-based coaching as well as tell-based approaches such as seeding. She illustrates her view, based on her own previous frustrating experience:

I couldn't bear being coached because I had always worked with the purists who just asked questions...

Client: "What time is it?"

Coach: "Well what time do you think it is?"

Client: "I don't know I haven't got a watch"

Coach: "So, what do you do to find out the time if you haven't got a watch?"

Client: "Well, I ask you. Can you tell me the fucking time, please?!"

You've probably had that experience, it's a factual question "what time is it?" "Don't coach me, tell me the bloody time!" (CR2)

Most of the coaches who use seeding, report doing so regularly, in some practices, such as CR2, seeding is quite common, while for CR4, it is part of being transparent with the client and is seen as an enabling factor for them in future situations:

To me it's about being up-front with the client. Rather than doing some kind of dark-art thing, where I'm kind of practising REBT on someone and they don't even know about it. I'd much rather say "look here's this thing that you might find useful..." Because for me, a real fundamental thing about coaching is that people should leave the coaching conversation more able to deal with situations in the future. It shouldn't be that I've done something to them that has "fixed" them and they go away and don't know what's happened. It's about them learning about themselves. (CR4)

All coaches who use seeding do so because it seems to produce results. Where there are differences is whether seeding is coaching at all (CR1), and if it is, then there are the varying interpretations and roles of seeding in coaching practice.

Categories of Experience

This section describes themes of experience identified in the data and is organised by the magnitude both in intensity (perceived affective measure) and outcomes (perceived causality of change). The categories below – Category 1 and Category 2 seeding occasions, are categories of client and coach experience, and attempt to categorise the impact of seeding occasions on them.

For clients, Category 1 occasions are characterised by sudden and dramatic moments of profound insight, often carrying enormous emotional energy and can be life-changing events. Category 1 occasions are also energetic for coaches, but not in the same order of magnitude as clients. Coaches report deep satisfaction when witnessing the effects on the client and are often left emotionally and physically drained by the intensity of the experience.

Category 2 occasions for coaches and clients, by contrast tend to be slower, often more deliberate and measured processes (rather than events) that can continue noticeably for years after coaching has ended – this is reported by some CRs who have been in contact with clients for a period of years. Whereas, with all of the reported Category 1 occasions, the changes for the client are profound, only some Category 2 occasions result in large magnitude changes and when they do, they seem to take a long time to fully realise themselves. Most successful seeding occasions are Category 2 occasions, Category 1 occasions, though the first to be remembered were rarely reported by comparison.

Category 1 Seeding Occasions:

In category 1 occasions for coaches, the emergence of a seed into the coach's consciousness is often abrupt and accompanied by emotion or agitation. The clients, in all of the Category 1 occasions discussed, are experiencing some kind of distress or facing ambiguity or uncertainty, they often feel pressurised and anxious. Levitt et al. (2004) found similar conditions in their investigation into transformative insights. Once seeding occurs, there is a characteristic sudden release of emotion and typically large scale change occurs in a very short period of time. The seed seems to trigger a rapid catalysis of thought for the client and the speed of change, in some cases, can appear so fast as to seem spontaneous.

CR2 describes her experience of a Category 1 seeding occasion. Her client, "Bob", a senior male manager in an arts company was experiencing deep and enduring difficulties in relating to his peers and management, causing significant stress for all concerned. Despite more than a year of coaching work, he had not been able to overcome the challenges facing him. The clients' state was one of high anxiety, his health was deteriorating and his emotions were running high. During the conversation, she recalls...

...I suddenly started to fidget in my seat and I got hot, I got really, really hot. I really wanted to use Transactional Analysis, 'Parent Adult Child' as everybody calls it. And it came to me in a flash that this is going to help him to understand how he's contributing (to the situation), and give him some tools for understanding why other people are reacting the way that they are.'

'...suddenly I had this surge of energy and leapt out of the chair. I have a whiteboard in the office and I said "Do you mind if I use this?" "Can I talk to you about something that's going to help?" And he was suddenly... he'd picked up on my energy because he'd been sort of slouching, so he sat up straight, "No, go on then!" (client said) and an absolutely brilliant...(session followed) we ended up going massively over time because suddenly, that seeding thing is exactly what happens, suddenly all the stuff we've been analysing, (the) situations he'd been in using that framework and that how, when he did this, that had happened, and when [his] boss did that, that made him feel like this, so he did that, and at the end there were lines and squiggles all over the whiteboard, he just he got it! (CR2)

The seeding occasion for Bob was very dramatic, emotional and initiated a series of transformative changes. In the words of CR2, even though her client was largely responsible for the difficulty he was experiencing, she saw that '... this is a guy who is in a huge amount of pain, you

know, he is in terrible, terrible pain...’ The urge to use the TA ego-states in a seeding occasion came from the place of ‘oneness’ that she describes in her coaching, which is a state of high empathy and connection with the client. She continues...

He had a cry in the office and a big hug as he went, he was very emotional and then at about midnight he sent me this really long email about how wonderful an experience it had been and it actually gave him insight into all sorts of behaviour.
(CR2)

Bob’s story is typical of other Category 1 reports. Four of the six CRs had experienced several Category 1 seeding occasions. CR4 described one occasion as having ‘worked like a dream. It was amazing!’ and on another occasion it created a ‘real turning point’ for her client. CR6 describes Category 1 occasions as ‘Catalytic is the word that captures it best for me...’ and referring to the impact for clients it was ‘quite dramatic, in [...] those instances the catalysis was very sudden’ (CR6).

Category 2 Seeding Occasions:

All of the successful seeding occasions in the ER coaching in this study were Category 2 occasions. The two most profound outcomes of the research came from ER4 and ER5 where both clients cited seeding occasions as contributing to, causing and supporting significant decisions. CRs report that Category 2 occasions are far more common in their practice and, though less dramatic, still can go on to produce significant results.

Individual Depiction: The ER that ended up with the deepest engagement in seeding was ER5 (By the end of the study, 3 seeds were in active use in the coaching). At the beginning of the coaching the ER was a little unsettled in her job for several reasons and various prospects faced her. She could leave the company or stay and take a promotion that had been in the works for some time. Career-wise she had left the military 18 months previously and was having difficulty with the transition to ‘Civvy Street’, as life in civilian organisations is referred to. In the debriefing, she pointed to seeding occasions as the coaching moments that had been most helpful to her. In one instance, she really needed to understand some of the culture, behaviour and thinking that she was seeing in herself and with others at work, notably and most urgently with her boss. This was very different to her previous and considerable experience in the army. Another was that she needed to be able to present differently i.e. have some additional flexibility, in her interactions with various colleagues. Her open and quite direct style, although well-meant, and historically useful, wasn’t universally appreciated or getting the kinds of consistent results she needed and was causing confusion, frustration and some anger in herself – things that were holding her back and that she wanted to do without.

Ego States (with relevant supporting ideas – strokes and games also from TA) was a model that fitted her relationship with her boss really well –

...It’s increased my awareness. I thought about it a lot afterwards [...] The PAC thing helped massively because I put that into practice and I could see why (the boss) was doing the Parent / Child (transaction) [...] so that was very illuminating and the fact that I understood what was going on and could respond accordingly was really beneficial. (ER5)

Talking about the role the seeding played for her:

It’s mapping this new world, because some things were familiar and some things weren’t; so understanding the rules, the picture, the relationships... [is helpful]
(ER5)

and the outcomes she sees - she is able to step back, choose more appropriate strategies and understand the motivation of others in a more complete way:

In all honesty, I don't think I would have dealt with it as professionally. My thought processes have been very measured because I've been a lot more aware. I have greater peripheral vision with all of this.'

Elsewhere

'it brought things out of the "ether" of my thoughts, made it clearer' ... 'I have more understanding, I'm calmer, I don't feel quite so impatient because I know I am in the right place, have got more tools in my toolbox and I understand the game more. (ER5)

Cultural aspects and some specific relationships were modelled and discussed using Spiral Dynamics (Beck & Cowan, 2005) to improve understanding, empathy and communication and the ABC model from CBT was used to open the client to the role that her belief structures were playing. These three main ideas were combined into a way of seeing the environment that gave additional insight and opened up different possible strategies for approaching colleagues and situations.

Category 2 occasions were achieved with all but one of the ER cohort, and two ER's were able to make big decisions afterwards. ER4, for example was facing challenges at work and with some important life decisions. In debrief, she reported finding the seeding models had helped her create some order:

I feel more confident. I felt like I'd lost my path, just too many things, too many negative thoughts, this chaos I was floating about in, and felt I like I didn't know... So [now] I feel happier. (ER4)

While this seeding occasion isn't a Category 1 example, the conversations with the ER seems to have important elements of transformational change. I think the seed here seems to be helping and easing the growth process.

Effective Processes in ER seeding

This section briefly covers some items from the ER feedback that were either explicitly named or implied as being effective in seeding occasions.

Making it Objective: Clients remarked that being able to physically see the models that we were being talked about was very helpful. Four of the five clients who attributed progress to seeding said that being able to explicitly examine the model and 'tease' information out of it was an excellent experience and facilitated learning.

Application to Current Situations: It may seem obvious, but the extent to which a seed can be used to explain the clients' context and help them to discover previously unseen aspects of their own processes, those of others or the world in general, determines its usefulness. Critically, clients need to be able to apply it in work and life after the coaching session ends.

Use of common language and concepts: Seeds reframe or point out aspects of experience that were previously obscure and gives them names. In Kelly's words they add verbal 'handles' (Kelly, 1955) by which experience can be manipulated. This, in turn lends structure to the coaching engagement as a whole.

Outcomes

While remembering that outcomes in this study were not only generated from seeding, these are examples of outcomes that were attributed to seeding by the ER cohort.

Insight: All ERs who experienced seeding reported greater ‘clarity’ or ‘insight’ into current situations and past experience. Two ERs in particular had quite sudden insights or what they called ‘light-bulb’ moments. Several of the ERs said that the seeding had introduced a process of ‘crystallisation’, removed chaos and confusion and enabled them to make sense not only of their current situations but also past experience.

Expanded Horizons: As a result of insight and being able to add new perspectives, some ERs called seeding occasions, ‘illuminating’, or referred to them as ‘fitting a new piece into the puzzle’, and one ER referred to the process as ‘mapping a new world’. In each case, the clients were able to include new aspects into their previous perspectives. For example ER1 applied Wilber’s (2001) AQAL framework strategic thinking for his organisation. He used this to communicate important elements of a corporate strategy in light of the ideas and positively influence his fellow decision makers.

Affective and Interpersonal Dimensions: Two of the ERs said that they felt calmer and more confident, while one ER described feeling reassured. One ER made significant changes in both their personal and professional strategies of being more flexible, inclusive and understanding. The ER said that they doubted they would have had the clarity, courage or confidence to do so before the coaching interventions. Five ERs said that the understanding that had come from seeding had helped to improve their relationships with, or help them to better understand others in some form, both at work and at home.

Fit with coaching

I think it is evident from the data that seeding is not seen as incompatible with coaching by the majority of coaches. Some will see it as a part of coaching practice, and others will not. Those who use seeding see its value in delivering positive outcomes for their clients. The research shows examples of seeding, raising awareness, generating insight and aiding communication – all perfectly compatible with coaching. Though it seems to help coaches (in this study) to achieve good outcomes for their clients, it is not without controversy. A good example of this is the common principles in coaching of a “resourceful client” and a “non-directive” coach e.g. (Bluckert, 2006; Rogers, 2008). On the face of it, seeding is arguably antagonistic to these principles.

Coaches regard ‘their clients as resourceful and capable of finding their own solutions’ (Cooke (2011 p. 133). This ‘traditional conceptualisation’ is broadly representative of other authors who comment on the subject such as Berg and Szabo (2005); Rogers (2008). If a client is perfectly resourceful, in all situations as CR1 would contend, then seeding does not harness that principle. However, what is not specified is what “resourceful” means in any complete way. Is the clients’ “resourcefulness” the assumption that there is nothing that is beyond the means of the client? For example, can we assume that the client is capable of any and all feelings, behaviours, conceptualisations and changes that he may require, and that he can come to these on his own simply by working with the coach? What if, try as he might, the client cannot come to a satisfactory solution? According to some interpretations of this concept, the coach may not explicitly impart knowledge to the client e.g. Rogers (2008) distinction between content and process directiveness – the coach, the ‘process expert’, may only lead the client to discover new knowledge of their own and thus learn, and

may not provide 'content' (seeding is not allowed because it is not part of the clients resources). At most, the client can exercise judgement and veto the coach's suggestion if they choose to.

But if coaching is about learning (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004), learning in part assumes the accumulation of knowledge (Knowles, 1970), and if knowledge is both socially created (Brown & Duguid, 2002), and socially situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), then doesn't the coaches' participation in the coaching process and their resourcefulness then also form part of the client's "resourcefulness"? Bluckert (2006); Cavanagh (2006); O'Neill (2000) and Senge and Suzuki (1994) would argue for resources to be viewed from a complex systems perspective, thus supporting the idea that resources are not only personal, but cultural and systemic too. In this case, the resources e.g. seeds of another person, culture or system could also be taken to be part of a personally-accessible set of resources (notwithstanding law, morals and ethics).

The collateral question then is the notion of the "non-directive" coach. Metaphorically, I see a client standing on their last stepping stone, but still in the middle of the stream. Take 'Bob' discussed above, for example. The appearance of a seeding occasion, though it does not originate from within the clients' personal resources in the strict sense, the coach places a stone in the stream from his or her resources and the client, in stepping onto the stone and thereby reaching the far bank, and achieving their goals, uses their own resources, firstly to decide whether or not to take the step or to choose some other means and secondly to move themselves from stuck to having achieved a goal.

CR6 comments:

I think that (the) Rogerian position can be overstated and it can sometimes make it seem as if our clients are such delicate little flowers and if we dare to offer them something like this (seeding) we are going to be trampling on their actualising tendencies. (CR6)

While no final position on this debate is offered here, an illustration of some contributions to ongoing debates is important. I personally do not believe that a satisfactory solution to any of these questions is possible as long as the premises of the argument are seen as alternatives. Some form of dynamic integration seems to me the most likely to produce something worthwhile. This study was not intended to generate answers or new theory, but to explore the experience and use of seeding in coaching and how it applies to clients learning.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the use of structured interventions in coaching, how they are used in coaching practice and how it is experienced as a learning paradigm for clients, and has uncovered several important items in the data. For example, the research suggests that the practice of seeding in coaching is more wide-spread than one might expect given the absence of any substantial presence in the literature. In this study, seeding is a part of the majority of coaches' practices and even though its employment is widely varied, every coach who practices seeding reports that their use of it delivers beneficial outcomes for clients.

Clients seem to agree on this point, both from the reports of the CR cohort who have numerous experiences of the success of seeding in their practices and from the ER cohort who experienced positive outcomes from seeding during the study. For clients, the experience of seeding ranges from intense, rapid and dramatic transformation, filled with emotion on one end of the scale to more deliberate, yet still significant outcomes generated over time on the other. Sometimes instances of seeding having no effect at all, though, all but one of the ER cohort benefited from at least one successful seeding occasion. Given the apparently common use of seeding-like practice in the CR

cohort, it seems to me that something important is happening as a result of seeding, though there is, as far as I can tell, no ongoing constructive discussion to adapt the potential benefits of seeding for coaching.

There is literature that speaks to the use, dynamics, psychology and other aspects of structured interventions, however it remains diverse and unintegrated, leaving little immediate benefit for the coaching profession. In addition, the inclusion of seeding under the coaching umbrella is not without its' controversies and it seems as though, these will not easily be solved. Based on both cohorts of co-researchers, there is no indication that seeding will play a diminishing role in coaching in the future, and some, e.g. CR3 actively pursue ever-more effective structural interventions in their practice. If anything is to develop in understanding this phenomenon, there will be a lot of work to be done in achieving it. This research is merely a first glimpse of something that seems as-yet almost completely undocumented.

Limitations and recommendations for further study

This research is limited in several important ways. The study covers 12 people's experience in total, and though there are strong areas of similarity in their experience, and the phenomenon of seeding seems quite readily repeatable, it would be difficult to attempt any far-reaching conclusions, generalisations or extrapolations. The co-researcher cohorts are largely homogenous in that they are all middle-aged (one retirement age), white European, successful, well-educated and wealthy. A symmetrical gender split is represented in the cohorts, which is pleasing. Each of the co-researchers, because of the nature of the research, had some fore-knowledge about the subject of research, and this may have had some influence on the results, although I am unaware of any specific effects. From what I can see, this is the first item of research of its kind and therefore there are no benchmarks for comparison. Further research would need to explore and consolidate the diversity of literature and practice, to make the subject more easily addressable, enable the start of theory-building and give a frame to an evidence base. Being able to replicate the results in another setting would be useful, as would other inquiries using different, perhaps non-subjective research methods.

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