

From competencies to capabilities in the assessment and accreditation of coaches

Tatiana Bachkirova, Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University, UK

Carmelina Lawton Smith, Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University, UK

Contact Email: tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk

Abstract

Organisations that use coaching programmes express their need for the assessment of coaches to ensure quality of provision. One solution to this need has been provided by professional bodies that assess coaches as part of their accreditation systems, often using competency frameworks. In this conceptual paper we open four specific debates in order to explore inherent problems associated with this approach. We start by highlighting the divide that seems to be emerging in coaching between academia and the professional bodies. We then move on to discuss the degree to which the gradation of coaching expertise in assessment is justified. The third debate concerns the extent to which competency frameworks are appropriate for coach assessment. Lastly, we question whether the existing paradigms, on which many assessment systems are based, effectively represent the coaching interaction. We argue that by seeing the coaching engagement as a complex adaptive system, a different conceptual approach to the assessment of coaches is needed, one that focuses on capabilities rather than competencies alone. A new model for the assessment of coaches is discussed, together with implications of the proposed change for professional bodies and educators of coaches.

Keywords: coach assessment, competencies, capabilities, levels of professionalism, complex adaptive systems

Introduction

The coaching field is experiencing significant growth partly due to increasing demand for coaching in organisational contexts. Organisational clients are also becoming increasingly discerning in relation to the quality of coaching (Bluckert, 2004). There is an expectation for professional bodies to meet these needs by developing accreditation systems. The rising focus on issues associated with the assessment of coaches is also driven by the growing pull of practitioners and professional bodies towards the professionalization of coaching (Gray, 2011). The quality of education and credentialing of coaches is one of the first conditions for consideration of coaching as a potential profession (Gray, 2011). This may account for why so many different professional bodies have put significant effort into creating various systems for the accreditation of coaches. However, while such efforts were justified during the early stages of development of coaching as a field of practice, uncritical acceptance of these initial systems given the current level of maturity in the field, may need to be questioned. In this paper we will critically evaluate the initial approaches to coach assessment taking into account existing knowledge of similar attempts by more established professions. This is intended to help the

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coaching profession to learn from the maturation process seen in other disciplines and gives the benefit of utilising meta-perspectives potentially more suitable for conceptualising existing coaching practice (Richardson, 2008; Stacey, 2003; Jones & Corner, 2012; Cavanagh & Lane, 2012).

The task of identifying and assessing professional qualities of practitioners involved in complex professions is clearly a difficult process. It has been debated for many years in the conceptual literature by well-known authors exploring concepts such as personal knowledge (Eraut, 1994) and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987). The issue has been a topic of attention in occupations such as counselling, psychotherapy and consulting (Visscher, 2006). Several authors critique current accreditation systems in coaching that seem to oversimplify the task by disregarding the complexity of the processes involved in coaching and appear reductionist in the identification of coaching expertise (Garvey, 2011; Ferrar, 2006). However, these remain lone voices in the professional literature and have yet to attract the attention of significant policy makers in coaching. The reason for this apparent lack of interest merits further exploration. It may indicate that a stronger case needs to be made to highlight the issues associated with current coach assessment practices, or that debates need to include potential solutions to what seems like a serious problem.

In this conceptual article we address the following questions:

- How do professional bodies in various sectors approach the task of educating and developing their professionals?
- What is happening in coaching in this regard and what are the implications of the significant difference between coaching and other professions?
- What are the issues with the assessment frameworks that are currently used?
- What could be offered as a potential way forward?

The paper will highlight a number of problems structured around four key debates, followed by the introduction of a potential model to address some of the issues raised. It will start with a comparison of how other professions address the issue of assessing and accrediting professional practice and highlight the growing divide that seems to be emerging in coaching between academia and the professional bodies. This is notable in the fact that it does not appear to follow the pattern common within other professions where an initial academic qualification is almost a pre-requisite for entering the profession, as in medicine, law or engineering. It will then move on to discuss the degree to which the gradation of coaching skills in assessment is justified, since again this practice seems in contrast to what is adopted in other professional services. The third debate will discuss the level to which competency frameworks are appropriate for coach assessment, given the current evolutionary stage of coaching. Lastly we will question if existing paradigms on which many assessment systems are based effectively represent the coaching interaction and propose a different approach that focuses on the assessment of capabilities rather than competencies. We will introduce an alternative model that could serve as an example of a different approach and discuss implications of the proposed change for educators and professional bodies.

1. The education, training and a ‘right of passage’ debate

The coaching profession is not alone in trying to solve the problem of assessing practitioners who offer a complex professional service to the public (Lozano et al., 2012; Savanevičienė et al., 2008; NICE, 2012). The road to development of professional status in other established professions (e.g. law, medicine, psychology) usually starts from an entry point, which requires achievement of a recognised qualification from a university (Gray, 2011). Qualifications from the university sector are delivered by independent scholars of the subject area, and programmes have to adhere to independent state regulation that includes extensive peer review. Following a university qualification, professionals begin practicing under supervision until they reach a point of recognition by their professional body that allows them to be called ‘an independent practitioner’ (e.g. chartered psychologist). This might be called a ‘right of passage’ access point. Following their degree there is generally no further differentiation on the basis of assessed competencies, unless an additional qualification is gained. After that, there is usually a requirement to maintain the standard of practice through continuing professional development (CPD).

The situation in the coaching field is very different. There are numerous routes to independent practice as a coach. Coaching “has become an increasingly accepted cross-disciplinary methodology, and people from a wide variety of professional backgrounds are working as coaches” (Stober & Grant, 2006, p1). Some practitioners start by taking a short training course in coaching, while some start practising without any training at all. Others take a similar route to the established professions cited above and choose to achieve a qualification by completing a postgraduate programme at a university. At the same time, various professional bodies offer individual accreditation systems which may serve as a ‘right of passage’. However, accreditations are usually specific to one particular coaching body and not linked to any formal generic qualification route. In contrast to other professions, a university qualification in coaching is not recognised as essential. In fact it has become increasingly difficult for universities to gain accreditation for postgraduate courses by professional bodies because the accreditation systems are modelled on short training programmes with a focus on developing skills and completing coaching hours, rather than on developing critical thinking and understanding.

This disparity between traditional routes to professional practice and the current situation in coaching results in a number of practical issues that we, as coaches, supervisors, educators of coaches and members of the professional bodies, identify on the basis of our experience and observation. The first issue that we noticed is *a polarisation between qualification and accreditation, leaving many stakeholders and particularly newcomers confused*. This is also aggravated by the plethora of terms such as accreditation, certification, licensing, validation, etc. For the non-coaching population this confusion between qualification and accreditation can result in a negative image of coaching professionals and raise concerns about their expertise and the coaching discipline as a whole.

The second problem that we observed stems from too close a relationship between training providers and professional bodies. Professional bodies influence the content of training and accept payment for accrediting courses. They then accredit individuals who complete that training. Although logical at a first glance, the problem is that accreditation is not linked to any

formal neutral qualification route and *there is no independent party that can question the evidence base and quality of both stages: training and accreditation*. It is important that professional bodies with such power and influence in the field are open to questioning by others on the policies they develop in order to guard against accusations of collusion or partisanship.

We acknowledge that professional bodies are important because of the many functions they perform, such as the development of ethical frameworks, promotion and publication of CPD, creating communities of practice, educating buyers of coaching and promoting the industry. However, such bodies consist of ordinary people who are inevitably subject to certain biases and unconscious influences. For example, professional bodies of grass-root practices such as coaching are often made up of the professionals who 'got there first', the pioneers and early adopters. Although they may be well qualified in other subjects they may be the least qualified in coaching because they entered this profession when it was relatively new and immature. There is a danger that the systems of accreditation therefore reflect a historical perspective of the profession that is in alignment with earlier views and experience, without the benefit of the research that has been undertaken more recently. At the same time the early pioneers have a vested interest in keeping the established system of accreditation once created, because everyone's status and living depends on it, even when there is an awareness of potential problems and inadequacies. It is known that once created organisations tend to become self-serving (Johns, 1999) and professional bodies are not immune to this effect. To compound this issue, professional bodies are increasingly becoming commercial entities rather than essentially regulatory bodies. Awareness of such issues and tendencies would suggest the need for greater transparency and further links to independent parties in order to demonstrate that professional bodies are open to scrutiny and change if necessary.

Academic institutions could play the role of such independent parties, since they are publicly funded and have external quality assurance. They also have sufficient knowledge of the field and are interested in the profession's growing public image. However, *at the moment universities and professional bodies are drifting apart with negative consequences for the field*. Evidence of this can be seen as postgraduate university-based programmes are gradually losing professional body accreditation because they no longer fit with their skills-focused accreditation systems. Professional body recognition relies on individuals paying a substantial fee and undertaking training to the specific competency syllabus defined to meet the competency framework. Therefore the role of research and critical argument that is valued in universities seems to have no place despite being the cornerstone of progressive practice in any profession.

The lack of cross-fertilization of ideas between practitioners and researchers is also becoming more observable. For example, professional bodies' conferences are becoming weaker in terms of research-based papers. Their main influential voices (keynote speakers) tend not to come from academia, and often not even from the coaching community. Recognizing this problem, some professional bodies have created separate research-based and practitioner-based conferences. This does increase the profile of the research agenda but this separation makes the dividing line between research and practice even clearer. Universities in turn seem to respond to this situation by making their conferences more and more academic.

One of the consequences of this drifting apart is the lack of challenge to the professional bodies from independent parties interested in quality, professionalism, knowledge and research in coaching. On the other hand, academics may also be in danger of developing knowledge that is lacking relevance to the field to which they aim to contribute.

2. The ‘levels of professionalism’ debate

One example of where the polarization is most apparent between academic expertise and policy makers is in the gradation of coaches’ expertise. Most professional bodies now seek to differentiate levels of coaching skill with labels such as Practitioner or Master Coach. Although the ‘right of passage’ is an important function that professional bodies fulfil, because it demonstrates to the public that we aim to make our service safe for users, the levels of professionalism, such as gradation from Foundation level to Master Coach is a questionable distinction. The problem is that *the approach taken by most professional bodies towards gradation of professional expertise is based on competency frameworks that are as yet unsubstantiated.*

As a profession we would need specific research based on the respective levels, as at the moment there appears to be no strong case that coaching delivered by ‘Master Coaches’ is better than coaching delivered by any competent coaches. We are not aware of any research showing that coaching works in a more efficient way when conducted by Master Coaches in comparison to other coaches. In contrast, there is extensive research that shows that coaching is effective when delivered by relatively inexperienced coaches and even peer-coaches with limited training (e.g. Gyllensten et al., 2010; Franklin & Franklin, 2006). While such coaching might have been even more effective with alternative coaches, this is as yet unknown. There is currently only one paper from the life coaching context that compares outcomes from different kinds of coaches. It suggests that compared with peer coachees and controls: “coachees of professional coaches were more engaged in the coaching process, had greater goal commitment and progression, and greater well-being in terms of environmental mastery” (Spence & Grant, 2007, p.185). Although this is an interesting result, that professional coaches may be happy to hear, it does not help to justify the gradation of accreditation levels for professional coaches. Also, if we take into account the findings of studies in our sister-field of counselling, they apparently came to a similar conclusion. The meta-analysis of a significant number of studies found no evidence that professionals are more effective than paraprofessionals (Berman & Norton, 1985, Erwin, 1997).

The gradation of expertise on the basis of competencies might be justified in relation to much simpler or manual occupations. However, considering the complexity of factors influencing the quality of coaching and the many issues associated with evaluation of coaches, the levels seem an unnecessary initiative that other complex professions generally reject. In some other complex professions there are levels of Associate and Fellow membership, but these are experience-based rather than competency-based and have the function of honouring long-term members and their contribution to the field rather than indicating to users the level of service that can be provided.

There are many research-based and conceptual studies that explore the nature of mastery in specific complex professions (e.g. Dreyfus & Dreyfus; 2008; Schön, 1983; Drake, 2009).

However, all of them highlight the complexity of this mastery and none bring this concept to the level of competencies that could be assessed and accredited by professional bodies. In a professional practice such as coaching, the mastery is also conditional on the role of the client, the unpredictable nature of the relationship, and the context of the coaching engagement (Baron & Morin, 2009; Drake, 2009; Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2014; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011). It has been argued that mastery transcends rules and modifies existing knowledge according to the master's own organisation of experience and his or her own self, which cannot be translated into competencies that can be easily identified by assessors. In some cases it requires not simplistic classifications of competencies, but consideration of complexity in coaches' ways of thinking about themselves, their clients and the context in which they operate (Bachkirova, 2011; Berger, 2012). All research and theories on mastery are important, not for the purposes of classification of coaches, but for defining individual aspirations in professional development, and for knowledge necessary to create highly effective education, training and CPD of coaches.

3. The 'competency-based frameworks' debate

The third debate that we would like to open follows from the tendency of the professional bodies to base their accreditation systems on competency frameworks. According to Horton (2000) the 'competency movement has no single origin' but such frameworks became popular for benchmarking management skills after being introduced by Boyatzis (1982). However since then competency based frameworks have become subject to critique when applied to many contexts (Hyland, 1993; Horton, 2000). In relation to coaching practice together with Cox, 2003; Garvey (2011); Drake (2009); Cavanagh and Lane (2012) and Bachkirova (2015) we argue that *reliance on competency frameworks oversimplifies coaching practice and expertise and stultifies more creative solutions for a meaningful 'right of passage'*.

A competency was originally defined as an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job (Boyatzis, 1982). More recently it was described as the ability to apply knowledge, understanding, practical and thinking skills to achieve effective performance to the standards required in employment (NCVQ, 1997). There are, however, many issues with competency frameworks. They may not include every aspect that is critical to superior performance and some argue that superior performance could also be achieved in many contexts with a different set of competencies (Hayes, Rose-Quirie & Allinson, 2000). For example, the ICF coaching competency of 'planning and goal setting' was not found to be universally adopted by experienced coaches (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008). Applying competencies in environments that are innovative and fast moving is also said to limit inquisitiveness and exploration thus resulting in a certain degree of risk aversion where new emergent thinking is required (Granstrand, Patel & Pavitt, 1997). Others argue that competencies result in a reductionist philosophy that causes learning to be focused on the task rather than developing critical thinking (Foss et al., 2004). As a result it is likely that competencies identify behaviours that were successful in the past rather than addressing the mind-set needed for the future. Competencies also often ignore not so readily observable behaviour due to the complexity of assessment.

Some authors have also raised questions about the ability to separate coaching into its component parts. Drake (2011) for example contends that 'while it is possible to deconstruct

excellence into observable components [...] it is less possible to reconstruct excellence from these components' (p.140). Empirical research by Griffiths and Campbell (2008) also adds to this concern. In evaluating the ICF core competencies through a grounded theory study, they identified a number of potential anomalies and overlaps. For example 'establishing the coaching agreement' was a component of 'managing process and accountability rather than a competency of its own, and similar issues were raised in relation to the 'powerful questioning' competency. They also questioned if 'coaching presence' is a core competency and argued that it is a component part of 'active listening'. The implication of this work is that assessing against such a list may prove problematic if competencies cannot be distinguished or identified.

The coaching context also brings additional complications. Garvey notes that coaching literature emphasises 'individualism, autonomy, choice and complexity'. However, the professional bodies call for 'regulation, control standards and competencies' (2011, p.57) that seem in contradiction to the philosophy of coaching, which emphasises collaboration of the dyad and self-determination of the client (Bachkirova et al, 2015). This drive for regulation is often an effort to provide predictability to buyers. Yet such predictability may not in fact result from compliance to competencies. We have known for some time that the relationship is a key ingredient in coaching outcomes (De Haan, 2008) and in psychotherapy literature only 15% of outcomes are attributed to theory and techniques (McKenna and Davis, 2009). As a result we may be in danger of claiming a degree of quality assurance that cannot be justified. Organisations may well take adherence to competencies as a sign of quality and security that proves to be ill founded.

A number of other issues also raise questions about the value of competencies in the coaching context. Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) highlight that assessing the competent coach relies on knowing 'effective for what'. Without a context and purpose of coaching the assessment of outcomes may be flawed. For example, we know that some approaches to coaching can be effective despite demonstrating very few of the expected competencies such as 'the thinking environment' (Kline, 2009). There may also be more than one list of potential competencies that can be effective. In a study of 428 executive coaches Bono et al. (2009) found that psychologists and non-psychologist coaches generated two distinct types of competency listing. Such findings suggest that many alternative accreditation frameworks may be equally valuable, and therefore none may adequately reflect a set of core competencies required in coaching. Moreover, De Haan et al. (2011) identified that the behaviours that clients found 'most helpful' were listening, understanding and encouragement, so one might question if all subsequent competencies are as critical as extensive competency frameworks suggest.

The argument for the necessity of competency frameworks to meet external demands can also be legitimately questioned. The professional bodies sometimes argue that the creation of a competency framework is needed to meet the call from organisations for a framework that enables them to differentiate coaches. Yet the existence of frameworks does not guarantee coaches can be differentiated with consistency and accuracy due to the complexity of assessment. This raises the question of whether such frameworks are fit for purpose. It would be in the interests of professional bodies to embrace the complexity and unpredictable nature of coaching and educate buyers accordingly, instead of potentially de-valuing the art of coaching

and creating an impression that it can be easily taught as a set of behavioural activities. If coaching is reduced to such a list it has the potential to undermine the view of coaching as a profession.

Many authors highlight that the effective coach is far more than a set of skills and techniques. Wang (2013) describes it as a different way of being, coming from a profound coherence between what coaches do, what they say, what they believe and who they are. This internal consistency and congruence entails coaches' authenticity, which influences the way they exercise their skills and techniques. One might then question how effective a list of competencies can be in identifying the best coaches. While there may be a place for a list of competencies to define what to teach novice coaches, as Drake (2011) argues, many of these competencies seems less useful for assessing and developing people at more advanced levels: 'as novices they learn the rules, as intermediates they break the rules, as masters they change the rules and as artisans they transcend the rules' (Drake, 2011, p143).

The coaching communities and professional bodies are therefore in danger of falling into a 'bucket view' where the list of competencies may bear little relation to the decision-making processes at work (Gambrill, 2007). Lists of competencies, while a good starting point, provide a very restricted view of effective practice and bring a set of implications that may not be reflective of what is needed in the field.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above critique of competency frameworks is that competency approaches potentially oversimplify coaching practice and therefore misrepresent it – a conclusion also under debate by other professions. For example, an alternative view of competency approaches in higher education has been offered by Lozano et al. (2012). They strongly argued for the need to supplement a competency based approach with a capabilities approach and identify important differences between competencies and capabilities. A capabilities approach goes beyond closed and predetermined lists of competencies. It is not restricted by the demands imposed by the market, but emphasises critical and reflective capabilities that allow the person to choose action and goals according to values and an evaluation of a wider external situation. The focus of capabilities is therefore on the freedom that the person has and not merely in external expectations (Lozano et al. 2012). Competencies, in contrast, are externally demand-oriented to solve the problems that arise from outside; capabilities are guided by the exercise of individual freedom to choose an action according to their values.

This differentiation, if adopted for the assessment of coaches would mean that the focus would not be on the results that the coach achieves, but on his/her ability to opt of an action, choice or behaviour (Sen, 1999). This makes the assessment much more difficult. Competencies are manifested in behaviours and decisions in particular contexts and require repetitive observations of these to infer their stability. The complexity of assessing capabilities is greater because capabilities do not necessarily have to be expressed. Lozano et al. (2012) argued that non-observation of capabilities does not imply their non-existence. It may be the case that the coach has chosen not put them into action in a particular session. It cannot be inferred however that the lack of visibility indicates their absence.

4. 'A view on coaching' debate

The fourth debate that we would like to raise in relation to the assessment of coaches highlights another issue that follows from the apparent separation between academia and professional bodies. Without the active contribution of researchers and conceptual thinkers *professional bodies risk developing policies and procedures based on the old paradigms of knowledge unchallenged by current thinking*. As an example, it could be argued that approaches to accreditation of coaches developed by professional bodies are more in line with a modernist view of the world that implies a linear cause-effect relationship between theories, methods and outcomes in applied practice (Peterson, 1991; Fishman, 1999). With such a view, competencies are seen to create an element of predictability in relation to the results of interventions and thus are important. In contrast, a more postmodern stance on practice would question the above causality by introducing the element of joined meaning making of the practitioner and client and the emergent nature of coaching conversations (Stacey, 2003, 2012; Cavanagh and Lane, 2012; Richardson, 2008; Garvey, 2011; Jones and Corner, 2012). Postmodernism assumes that the quality of coaching engagements is subject to many influences, such as the characteristics of the coach, the characteristics of the client, many nuances of the coaching relationship and the significant role of contextual factors (Cox et al, 2014; Cox, 2003). The selves of the coach and client are also not fixed; they are constantly fluctuating in the process of interactions and are subject to wider influences. This view of the coaching engagement presents a strong challenge to the assumptions behind competency-based assessments of the coaches.

One specific theory that aligns a postmodern stance with coaching proposes that the coaching engagement should be seen as a complex adaptive system (CAS) (Stacey, 2003; Cavanagh & Lane, 2012). Adopting a CAS lens implies that the participants, their relationship and the context of engagement are regarded as being in a state of flux (Stacey, 2003). It has been argued that the CAS perspective represents a different ontological approach in comparison to traditional systems theory, which is a 'profoundly different way of understanding the world' (Richardson, 2008, p. 25). According to this view the process of coaching is seen as "a conversational, reflexive narrative inquiry ... as an alternative to restrictive rules and procedures" (Stacey, 2012, p. 95). Complexity thinking puts the emphasis on thinking how we work, probably more than spending time working (Richardson, 2008). For coaches, it might mean that rather than demonstrating our competence, we need to accept our limits, especially about what can be planned and pre-determined.

In relation to the differentiation between competency and capability approaches introduced earlier, we would argue that the capabilities approach is more in line with postmodern thinking. A capabilities approach for example is explicit in appreciation of the diversity of coaching styles in contrast to excessive universality of competencies that aim for predictability of the coaching process. A capabilities approach implies an approach to coach training and education that allows the development of the coach in congruence with the individual's characteristics and values, who they are a person and not only as an opportunity to assimilate a repertoire of competencies. The capabilities approach seems also more in line with postmodernism as it incorporates a more contextual and multidimensional view on quality of practice.

A case for a capabilities approach to the assessment of coaches

To summarise the issues with many current competency-based assessment systems Table 1 contrasts competencies with a capabilities approach that could more effectively reflect the view of coaching as a complex adaptive system.

What competencies imply	What capabilities imply
A checklist approach that seeks to identify specific behaviours as indicators of professional practice	A holistic process that can assess the relational factors that often determine coaching success
A process that assesses past performance and from that infers future performance	A way of evaluating meaning making of the hypothetical situations that the coach may face on the basis of learning
A reductive process that seeks to simplify effective coaching into specific activities	An expansive process that acknowledges the complexity of coaching and can give credit for the knowledge and understanding required to evaluate and respond to that complexity
An assessment that focuses on explicit knowledge of the assessment criteria and the ability of the coach to demonstrate those competencies explicitly	A way to expose the tacit knowledge that the coach holds that will be applied appropriately when relevant
An individualistic process to assess a collaborative activity	A systemic perspective that allows for contextual factors in the collaborative coaching process
A system for evaluating only outputs from the coach as a 'black box'	A system for evaluating the processes taking place within the coach as an instrument of coaching
The intention to seek universality	The appreciation of diversity and uniqueness

Table 1: Comparing a competency approach with a capabilities approach.

The task of creating an assessment system in line with the capabilities approach is not easy but some progress has been made. For example, Drake (2011) highlighted the need for new frameworks and proposed a model to achieve this. However, while his model has been applied to coach training it is less clear how it might be applied in an assessment context when organisations are seeking an alternative to the competency approach or in the context of accreditation/certification of coaches.

Recognising the limitations of any approach for this task in line with the above debates, but responding to the pragmatic need of organisations to validate their internal and external coaches, we describe our attempt to develop a capabilities approach to assessment of coaches. It has been designed and tested for accreditation of coaches at Oxford Brookes University and applied for validation of internal and external coaches within a number of the public sector bodies in the UK. Although this model inevitably has limitations and cannot resolve all the issues discussed above, it proposes a pragmatic alternative with an attempt to resolve some acknowledged concerns. The model is shown in Figure 1.

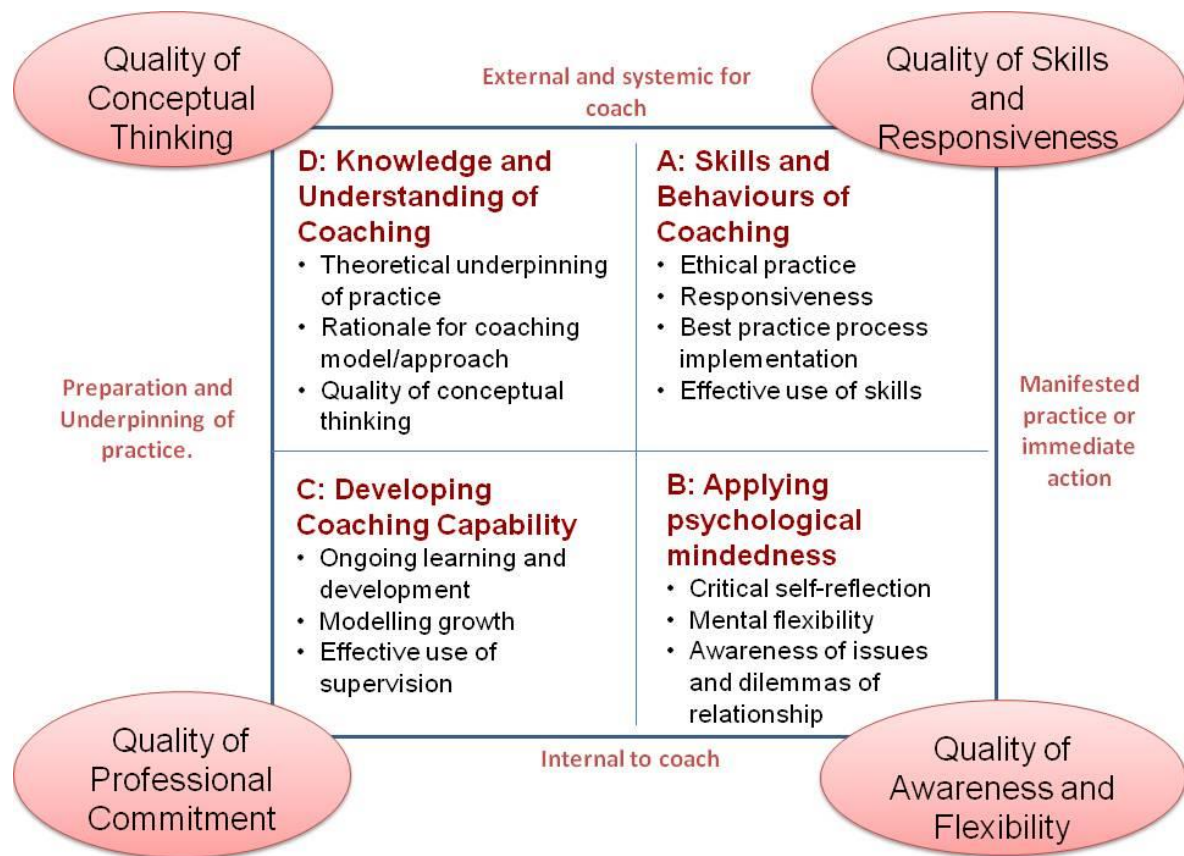


Figure 1: Oxford Brookes’ model for assessment of coaching capabilities

The proposed model is intended to provide a more holistic perspective on assessment with two core dimensions. The first is the internal/external and systemic dimension in relation to the coach. This dimension recognises that while certain attitudes and awareness of the coach are important, there are always external systemic components at play. These external components imply that attitudes and awareness of the coach are subject to various influences from many fields of knowledge, cultural expectations and ideas from the professional field about what is deemed good practice. Therefore there is a constant interplay and exchange between internal processes and the external context as is recognised in complexity theories, and the coach needs to build on external knowledge to develop their unique internal position on practice. Often coaches in assessment find it difficult to address both this external and internal dimension comprehensively. Some have become coaches by virtue of their natural empathy and their ability to listen, yet they lack the knowledge base of both coaching as a discipline and of the context within which they are working. By contrast, others being assessed may display a long list of credentials in specific contexts and a broad knowledge base from external sources but fail to demonstrate the personal self-awareness and internal ‘authenticity’ (Wang, 2013), their ‘self’ as a practitioner. The internal/external dimension therefore includes not only what the coach brings, but also what they take from the systemic context.

The second dimension represents what is intrinsic and extrinsic in relation to practice. Coaching is underpinned by much knowledge and understanding that may not always be

explicit in the interaction. Such activity informs and guides the coach, but may not be immediately visible to the external observer and may not generate a behavioural output. However, effective practice relies on work that is done in preparation and learning/thinking about practice, together with the outward manifestation of that work - what the coach actually does. For example, a coach may be extremely knowledgeable about how to be a good coach, even holding a doctorate, but find it difficult to transfer that knowledge into action and engage in core coaching behaviours helpful for their clients. Similarly a coach who 'coaches' by numbers following a very restrictive model, may in competency terms tick enough of the boxes required for accreditation, but fail to be effective long term because they lack the ability to develop and learn from their practice and to deviate from the prescription when it proves inappropriate.

The matrix developed from these two dimensions creates four areas of focus that can be used in the assessment of coaches. These four areas are:

- A. Quality of Skills and Responsiveness, reflecting the skills and behaviours required
- B. Quality of Awareness and Flexibility, the ability to apply psychological mindedness
- C. Quality of Professional Commitment, the motivation to develop coaching capability
- D. Quality of Conceptual Thinking, holding the knowledge and understanding of coaching

The assessment model allows activities to be designed around each of the four quadrants.

Quality of Skills and Responsiveness: It is clear that some aspects of skills assessment will be important for assessing coaches. All the professional bodies use alternative frameworks and academic literature identifies some core components that contribute to effective practice (e.g. Wang, 2013). This framework, however, puts emphasis on the responsiveness of the coach and adaptation of these skills and elements of good practice in the changing environment of a coaching session. Therefore this area needs to be assessed through observed practice rather than through a set of credentials or personal assertions.

Quality of Awareness and Flexibility: Seeing the coaching engagement as a complex adaptive system makes it clear that the quality of interaction and relationship between coach and client plays a major role in the potential outcome. This role is strongly supported by the relevant professional literature and research-based studies (e.g. De Haan, 2008; McKenna & Davis, 2009). In assessment of this area the expectation is that mental flexibility and the ability to 'tune in' are important assets in building a good working alliance with a client. Self-awareness and quality of reflexivity are assessed by the coach's ability to understand psychological nuances of the coaching relationship and to critically evaluate their action and choices in response to various dilemmas of coaching practice.

Quality of Professional Commitment: Coaches might aim to call themselves professionals and a characteristic of a professional is that 'once fully qualified, (they) engage in learning or training as part of what is now termed continuing professional development' (Gray 2011). This includes not only technical proficiency, but for this particular role - personal and relational maturation (Drake, 2009). One core aspect of this area is the ability to create a meaningful developmental plan that is based on good understanding of the self and the context of their practice. Another important aspect is to make good use of supervision. Here we identify

supervision not only as a source of relevant information/feedback/advice or as a support system, but as an interactive engagement in a meaningful reflection on practice and an opportunity to explore their self as a professional.

Quality of Conceptual Thinking: Coaching draws from a truly cross-disciplinary knowledge base and the variety of entry points adds richness to the knowledge acquired by coaches through the diversity of experience. However, even rich professional knowledge is not sufficient if the coaching process is seen as a complex adaptive system. By including an assessment of this area, the expectation is that the coach can create a coherent model of their practice integrating relevant knowledge of the profession and the context they are working in, aligning these with the person they are as a professional. Such a model allows articulation of “why they do what they do” with sufficient depth and flexibility of conceptual thinking.

To operationalize this model a number of activities have been designed that draw together and integrate these aspects. The process benefited from being delivered by an academic institution independent to the organisational client and was based on attendance at a half-day event that was designed not only as validation, but also as a developmental opportunity for all attendees.

As the model has now been piloted with three organisations we have an opportunity to critically evaluate it and to argue that it is sufficiently different from the majority of accreditation systems in a number of ways. In terms of critique it still requires an assessment of some elements similar to competencies with an implication that not all of such elements are observable in a short session. However, it focuses mainly on capabilities in line with an appreciation of complexity of practice and the diversity of coaching styles. We believe that this approach provides an opportunity for conducting an evaluation that models and allows for inter-subjectivity in the process of interaction, in line with a more postmodernist perspective.

In terms of the differences with other systems this approach benefits from being a face-to-face process and can therefore assess in a more holistic way the relational factors at play in the immediacy of developing situations. Coaches are questioned about unfolding situations or hypothetical events and assessors can form their view in the process of interaction. The format is also flexible enough to allow institutions to set their own appropriate benchmarks according to the types of coaches being assessed. By avoiding a checklist approach in favour of four broad areas of investigation, it allows for systemic variations depending on the context the coaches operate in. It also allows assessors a legitimately holistic approach to the interpretation of their observations, thoughts and feelings, thus more in alignment with the philosophy of coaching as a discipline.

Conclusions

In this paper we have explored a number of problems with the accreditation/certification of coaches by professional bodies using four specific debates. We argued that traditional competency based frameworks are oversimplifying coaching practice and thus creating a false sense of security by assessing only reduced manifestations of coaching. In the second half of the paper we argued for a more expansive approach to assessment based on capabilities that is more in line with current thinking. We also introduced our attempt to design a capability

approach in response to the pragmatic needs of large organisations concerned with the quality of their coaching provision.

We believe that the critical review of the issues with the assessment of coaches allowed us to draw an important connection between two theoretical ideas. The first is a differentiation between a competencies approach and a capabilities approach, reflecting a similar debate in higher education (see Hyland, 1993). The second idea is a tension between two dominant worldviews: modernist and postmodernist. The modernist view shows parallels with the competency approach, highlighting many issues that are present in current coach accreditation systems. By way of contrast, the capabilities approach shows synergy with postmodern thinking and offers a theoretical shift that might be necessary if we wish to align our practice with a more expansive view of the world that acknowledges complexity, unpredictability, and the intersubjectivity of meaning that we create. This shift would also reflect the principles of human agency, diversity and equality that are amongst the values appreciated by coaches and coaching communities, thus demonstrating clear philosophical alignment.

Theoretically, although postmodern thinking has developed as a challenge to modernism, it is inevitably built on the achievements generated by modernism. The same logic could be applied to the movement from competencies to capabilities in the assessment of coaches. An element of competencies may be unavoidable in assessment but the capabilities approach builds on this and provides a more complete view of the role of the coach in contrast to the more restricted view that competencies alone provide. Judging by our discussions with many coaches we believe that this view already reflects how many coaches see their practice and their own role within it. Individually we might be further along this route than our collective practices and policies dictate.

The implications of such an expansion would be significant for various stakeholders in the coaching field. Firstly, in the education and training of coaching the change towards a capabilities approach and more postmodern thinking would require a curricular move away from teaching a uniform set of skills and knowledge geared towards a predetermined set of competencies. It would require more focus on the development of the coach as a person and a professional, aiming for congruence between the person and their particular model of practice. There would need to be specific attention to the development of criticality and reflexivity as generic skills. These are a prerequisite for an ability to evaluate various positions, and to be empowered to make choices, enabling coaches to act in accordance with their values and worldview.

For professional bodies developing accreditation systems it might be necessary to adopt a broader capabilities approach that reflects the complexity of coaching practice rather than a pure competencies approach. It might be useful to revisit the solution of other complex professions to the same problem of ensuring the quality of service provided. Some professions have opted for postgraduate education as an entry point, others for a practitioner-in-training route. One of the solutions to the quality problem might be adding to entry point assessment, regular 'fit for practice' checks by extending the role of coaching supervision. Although none of these solutions are perfect, it has to be noted that complex professions do not tend to rely only on competency framework assessments as a right of passage into the profession. It would also be important for professional bodies to engage in educating the buyers of coaching

services. Organisations would benefit from a more realistic view of what it is possible to predict by appreciating the complexity of practice and the coaching relationship rather than relying on artificial benchmarks.

A further implication for practice is the importance of a better relationship between professional bodies and academic institutions in order for the dialogue about the nature of coaching to develop. This will ensure that the coaching field maintains both credibility and relevance as it moves towards professionalization. As the subjectivity of human judgment become more apparent and acceptable, professional bodies would benefit from an independent party to be involved in the decision-making process about important policies.

Finally, another important implication of the shift towards a capability approach and a more postmodernist stance is concerned with expanding the view of research in coaching. We still need research aligned with the modernist search for cause and effect and therefore large-scale outcome studies. However, we also need much more research aligned with the view of coaching practice as a multidimensional and contextually rich activity. This will enable the coaching profession to learn about the capabilities of coaches in order to evaluate and develop them. This research might address such questions as:

1. What coaching capabilities are recognised as such by coaches and other stakeholders?
2. Would the outcomes achieved by coaches validated through a capabilities approach show any difference from those assessed against competencies alone?
3. How do clients experience the relationship with coaches accredited within these two approaches?

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Dr Tatiana Bachkirova is a Co-Director of the International Centre for Coaching and Mentoring Studies at Oxford Brookes University, UK and is a Reader in Coaching Psychology. She is an active researcher and author of many publications including the book *Developmental Coaching: Working with the Self*. She is a member of the Scientific Advisory Council at the Institute of Coaching at Harvard and the Convener and Chair of the *International Conference in Coaching Supervision*.

Dr Carmelina Lawton Smith is a coaching and development specialist and combines private consultancy with a lecturing role on the MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice at Oxford Brookes University Business School. She is a member of the British Psychological Society and the Association for Coaching. She sits on the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching* and is a member of the Oxford Brookes University Supervision Conference Academic Board.