

Book review

Coaching for professional development: Using literature to support success by Christine A Eastman (2019), London: Routledge

Elaine Cox [✉](#) (Oxford Brookes Business School, Oxford)

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This is an exciting book and a wonderful addition to the coaching literature. Following a valuable introduction to the use of literature as a mechanism for dialogue in the coaching context, there are five main chapters in which Eastman provides detailed accounts of how literary texts, mainly short stories, have been introduced and discussed with student coaches as a way of helping them think about and approach their practice. The author provides useful examples and does not shirk from the problems she has faced teaching her student coaches to think using literature.

Eastman considers it important to begin with an overview of each author's literary career, perhaps as a means of contextualising the literary piece and increasing the writer's authority. She then explains the implications and outcomes of using a particular text with coaching students and the relevance of each to developing as a coach, particularly in relation to empathy, emotion and reflection on practice. The book therefore fills a gap since there are insufficient creative techniques capable for fostering new levels of emotional depth and understanding to deal with the complex dilemmas that coaches face in today's conflict-ridden and high-pressured workplaces. The literature approach is described as offering new perspectives or a different lens through which to view commonly presented coaching issues. Considering fiction alongside the challenges of day to day reality offers the opportunity for distancing, thus enabling increased critical reflection.

Chapter One of this book introduces 'Bartleby' (a Herman Melville short story) and examines how the pedagogic experiment to introduce literature in the coaching context can facilitate discussion on issues such as empathy and compassion. Similarly, the second piece of literature to come under Eastman's scrutiny is Willa Cather's 'Neighbor Rosicky', chosen to enable an exploration of emotion through the lens of a fictional character. Eastman explains how she chose this text to help promote self-reflection in a way 'Bartleby' had not. Again, there is a brief author biography and a note of recognition of Cather's ability to stimulate thinking about emotion in her readers.

Chapter three introduces two texts: 'The Swimmer', a short story by John Cheever and 'Notes of a Native Son', an essay by John Baldwin. Both deal with themes of complexity in human relations, of rationality versus emotion enabling a space for reflection and the opportunity to compare, reflect

and record critical tensions. Relatedly, the fourth chapter of Eastman's book focuses on Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman' where it is emphasised how using literary works as a touchstone can "serve as a proxy in difficult coaching conversations" (p. 103). The stress in this chapter is not only on the use of fiction as 'self-help' but also on the benefits of exploring literature in organisational coaching contexts, such as with teams.

The final text chosen is an Italian political novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa entitled 'The Leopard'. Again, the text is intended to enhance empathy and emotional intelligence, but as Eastman explains, this is a difficult text, but that when analysed it could be viewed as extremely relevant to thinking about change and change management. In this chapter, Eastman also stresses that language and coaching are deeply intertwined and explains how their exploration can offer challenges as well as rewards.

The theme that Eastman emphasises throughout the book therefore, is that engaging with literature has benefits. She argues that we may even regard the characters "as voices that accompany our lives, voices that may help us to untangle the moral contradictions and murky ambiguities at work or at home" (p.28). Used as 'case studies' in this way, short stories and other texts can provide useful tools for coaches to use for their own development as well as when working with clients to solve problems.

I don't think the title of the book is helpful and it is not indicative of the book's content. But it is a great specialist book, for teachers of coaches and developers. I have enjoyed reading it but have not yet read the texts chosen by Eastman for in depth discussion here. I do intend to read them soon though, using the book as my companion, since their potential for understanding human nature seems immense.

References

Eastman, Christine A. (2019) *Coaching for professional development: Using literature to support success*. London: Routledge.