Coaching in organisations: how the use of fictional characters can develop coaching practice

Introduction

In the last few decades narrative coaching (Mattingly, 1998; Anderson, 2004; Baldwin, 2005; Drake, 2007) has made a substantial contribution to reframing our understanding of how telling stories can address the challenges and complex issues of everyday life. Drake's (2007) research, in particular, makes a powerful case for storytelling as a means of conceptualising our position in the workplace and of resolving professional problems. Storytelling is the vehicle by which coaching dialogue emerges: coachees narrate workplace experiences in the form of a story and coaches listen and respond to the story told to them. If a major part of coaching involves the telling of and listening to stories, in what ways might fictional stories be used to enhance the training currently offered to coaches? Such is the question that motivated the author to conduct the pedagogical experiment reported in this paper.

At the beginning of the academic year in 2015, a student on a 60-credit project module of the MSc in Leading Sales Transformation aligned with the Business School of Middlesex University claimed that most of what he was reading in the field of coaching evinced little understanding of what he termed "real world practice". It is a complaint I had heard many times over the years from a variety of postgraduates investigating coaching. The students in my course often argued that many of the coaching models they were reading about were too theoretical, and that they found it difficult to apply these models to their everyday practice. I had always felt there was little I could do within the constraints of the curriculum to make my module more practical. I had continually felt hampered by voluminous set texts to get through each year and so had always faced students' quibbles about the overly theoretical nature of the course with trepidation. But in September 2015, this particular student's criticism set me on a train of thought that ultimately gave rise to the pedagogical intervention that this paper describes. I began to think that perhaps fictional texts might provide the ideal setting in which my postgraduate students could test out the theory-based coaching models that formed an integral part of the module. I was aware that case studies are often used in coach training for this purpose, but I also felt that these sometimes dry textbook activities were part of what my students were reacting against. I needed something richer and more detailed, a more engaging hypothetical scenario for my students to apply the coaching models they had been exposed to in my module.

I decided that literary fiction might provide the ideal realm in which to test, as Schatzki (2002) puts it, theory against the reality of practice. My class of 12 postgraduates on the coaching module were to become, over the next year, the guinea pigs on which I would test my hypothesis. I wanted to see if fictional characters could become this necessary simulative threshold, the hinge between theory and practice that my students deemed so necessary. My contention was that fiction offers scenarios that can be used to simulate workplace problems, and that the genre presents coaches with an opportunity to apply theoretical models to make-believe scenarios. I devised an ungraded extension activity in which students would coach a fictional character from a story I had asked them to read. I then requested feedback from the student participants in order to gauge how effective they found the activity in bridging that gap between theory and practice. This paper offers a qualitative analysis of the effectiveness of the pedagogical intervention, based on the students' work for the extension activity and on their responses that were solicited in order to measure the value of the activity. I set out the case for using literary fictional texts to enhance coaching dialogue and I seek to contribute to narrative coaching more broadly by demonstrating how literary fiction can be used to enhance coach training.

The following is a critical account of how I helped students interrogate their own coaching interventions by using fictional literature. I draw on both coaching and practice-based inquiry literature to demonstrate how literary fiction can be used in coaching practice. I will first provide a context for this case study, giving the reader the aims and rationale for the paper as well as outlining how I drew on literatures around coaching, research practice and literary fiction. I will explain my pedagogy and the challenges I faced. Finally, I will detail my findings and will critique the process I chose for this teaching intervention. My contention is that critical thinking skills in professional practice are enhanced by reading widely in fields such as history, philosophy and literature – the humanities – so that students' investigations draw on literature that reinforces or challenges their own observations. Students ideally need to demonstrate the ability to analyse and synthesise complex and possibly conflicting ideas. Using fictional characters in a coaching intervention can harness imagination, encourage growth, enrich the curriculum and, especially for professional practice students, close the gap between theory and practice.

Context of this study

I work with students from both small and large organisations that support their employees in undertaking a postgraduate practice-based inquiry. These inquiries are 12,000 word projects, typically in coaching, that are designed to give the students some insight into how to improve practice at their organisations. This paper derives from a teaching intervention undertaken with one of these cohorts of students in the academic year 2015–16. The particular cohort in which I trialled the novel pedagogy outlined in this paper consisted of 12 students working in managerial posts in the sales section of a multinational corporation that provides a range of business solutions to its customers. The paper takes the form of a case study, a vehicle for exploratory research in which nothing is strictly proven but from which we may draw generalisations, an investigative mode ideally suited for solving practical problems, such as the gap between theory and practice in coach training brought to the fore in the opening section of this paper (Dul and Hak, 2007). The case study is a particularly valuable mode for the presentation of my research here as it offers a means of drawing pedagogical best practices from my experience that can be replicated with future cohorts — my own, and ideally those of other educators in the field of coaching.

Over the course of two terms I supported this group of 12 students in the research and writing of their projects, which centred on how to use coaching in the workplace. Their words and writing excerpts in this paper were elicited through informal interviews, email responses and classroom exchanges. I have anonymised all the respondents by giving each a fictitious forename. Each of the respondents gave permission to use his or her words for the purpose of this research. It might be useful to define the parameters of my study, as well as to explore my own interest in coaching and how I link my coaching ideas to those of my students. I aim to demonstrate the successes and challenges of my practice, which I hope will interest other educationalists, particularly those who work with organisations.

The study

Stronagh and Maclure (1997, p. 56) point out that the central task for research is "to try to uncover the methods and sense-making procedures that members of a culture apply to find/create regularity and stability in the phenomenal world". Professional practice students on the module I teach are concerned in particular with the "methods and sense-making procedures" used by new recruits to negotiate the complex working world of their company. In general, their projects concern how to select and retain the best members of staff and the role of coaching in the quest to improve staff productivity and well-being. Students on the

module typically discuss a range of coaching models and how they might be adapted to their company. The work they produce is invariably rich in theoretical detail: their handling of the critical literature is exemplary and they are able to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a multitude of coaching models. But their projects all too often fail to reach beyond the realm of the abstract in order to offer practical examples of how coaching might be used effectively in their workplace. Their neglect of the practical, experiential component of coaching can be explained in part by their lack of coaching experience. Many of my students have yet to apply what they have learned about coaching to the reality of the workplace. They are conversant with the theories but have yet to apply the models and witness them in action. However, for the 2015–16 cohort, spurred on by a comment early in the year by one of the students regarding the absence of a consideration of "real world practice" in the coaching models under discussion, I determined to put at these students' disposal a practice-oriented setting by which they might begin to consider how to apply the coaching theories in the actual workplace. I could not provide these students with a real workplace and disgruntled employees with which to hone their theoretical expertise. But I was able to provide them with a simulacrum almost as engaging as the real world.

I chose two works of literary fiction for the students to read: Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street* (2007 [1853]) and John Cheever's *The Swimmer* (2007 [1964]). *Bartleby* is a lawyer's narrative about an employee (Bartleby) who turns out to be hardly the most productive the lawyer might have wished for. With his constant refrain of "I would prefer not to" to requests for tasks to be completed, Bartleby does less and less until he wastes away from starvation in the New York Tombs because he would "prefer not to" eat. *The Swimmer* charts the voyage of Neddy Merrill who one long summer afternoon decides to swim through all of his neighbours' pools in order to return home. Neddy undertakes the odyssey with zeal, but by the time he eventually completes his adventure, he finds his house has been sold and his wife and children have vanished. The two stories have the advantage of being relatively short works. Both are concerned with disaffected, disengaged protagonists: a common problem for the professional practice students on the module I teach is confronting challenging behaviour exhibited by a team member or client. But for my 2015–16 cohort I realised it was not enough for the students simply to have observed problematic behaviour in the past: they needed the kind of awareness (language, concepts, roles and procedures) that Sole and Edmonson (2002) claim exemplify the practice-based perspective. Characters such as Bartleby and Neddy Merrill embody the intransigent and disturbing personalities

encountered – in the extreme end – at work and offer the student the opportunity to reflect on themes such as self-determination, power, independence and resistance during the coaching process. The two classics are also beautifully written texts that the students can use to explore their professional practice and gain confidence in their academic work by attending to language. Capobianco and Feldman (2006) point out that we have a moral obligation to improve practice. We also have a moral obligation to improve our students' research practices, which include writing clearly.

I wanted the students to treat the stories as coaching interventions: the main characters were employees in need of the students' wise counsel as coaches. The idea was to use the fictional scenario as a coaching problem for which the students could devise solutions. I asked the students to be particularly attuned to the language used in the short stories they were discussing and to try not to imitate but rather to model their own writing on the qualities of simplicity, dynamism and directness that they could presumably observe in the fictional writing, which as many of them admitted provided a stark contrast with the coaching literature and learning theories to which they were usually exposed. The students wrote 500-word pieces on how to coach the characters in the stories. If the students were uncovering a gap between theory and practice, the task was to close that gap in their practice narratives. Based on my previous research using fiction in a work-based learning curriculum, I anticipated that fictional works might be a way of getting students to address issues of core identity, life themes and narrative representation. I believed I could support them to create coaching models and interventions that would narrow their own identified breach between theory and practice. My theory was that by encouraging the students to challenge their "perceptions, interpretations, explanations and conclusions" (Bassey, 1992, p. 4), their coaching projects and subsequent coaching practice would be considerably strengthened. This critical inquiry would use fiction as the link between theory and practice, and its use would provide the additional benefits of avoiding "the clumsy English, overloaded with terminology that is familiar to few people, poorly constructed, long-winded, and in general, written from the perspective of the writer with no concern for the audience" (Bassey, 1992, p. 10) which can affect many research projects.

Of the 12 students comprising the cohort, I discovered that the six students who completed the extension activity went on to produce projects of a higher quality than those who failed to complete the activity. The improvement can feasibly be attributed to the expected superiority of the more motivated students: students who agree to take on an extension activity are likely

to be more studious than their peers who choose not to and are likely to invest greater time and effort in their work. But I discovered, moreover, in the work produced by the students who took on the extension activity, a marked improvement on the work produced by previous cohorts. By way of illustration, below are collated two extracts from projects awarded a first-class grade in consecutive years. The first, by Henri, is from the 2014–15 cohort and the second is by Harry, one of the students who completed the extension activity in 2015–16. The two offer a substantially similar discussion of the same coaching model, but Harry's adds a new dimension to the discussion that is invariably absent from the work of his peers in previous years:

> Henri: The GROW model (Whitmore, 1992) conceptualises advancement in the workplace as travel. It places special emphasis on the coachee elucidating where they are now and deciding on the appropriate path to follow. Such a model is well placed to improve staff retention in [our company] because it does not assume that the coach holds all of the answers to the coachee's problems. When staff are placed on a PIN [Performance Improvement Notice] they somehow assume that it is the duty of their PM [Performance Manager] to set out the guidelines and parameters of their path to productivity. However, the PM's task must be to enable the team member to see for himself what needs to be done, not to spoon feed him. The GROW model relies on self-diagnosis as a key ingredient to performance improvement and should have a key role to play in [our company's] performance management.

> Harry: There may be any number of reasons underlying the malaise exhibited by an under-performing employee. It is easy to assume that the workplace in itself is generating the problems displayed by the team member. The GROW model [...] provides a corrective to this thinking by showing how the coachee is in the front seat when it comes to performance management. Much like the therapist to his patient, the coachee must analyse his own performance, reflecting on the "reality" Whitmore (1992, p. 56) sees as central to self-diagnosis in coaching. Nevertheless, the GROW model might put too much stock in the role of the coachee. Sometimes it is the coach who has to peel the scales from his employee's eyes through frank discussion. The coaching dialogue is two-way. The most difficult employees sometimes require the intervention of a firm figure who is not prepared to indulge a disgruntled employee's fantasies, but who is prepared to get under the staff member's skin and get to the root of the problems in the search for solutions.

At a first glance the two excerpts are remarkably similar. Harry makes no explicit reference to Bartleby or to the extension activity he completed as part of the course, but it is easy to see how Harry's thinking is inflected by his reading of the Melville story and by the practical approach he was obliged to assume as part of the activity. Having applied the GROW model in a practical scenario, Harry is less reticent to pointing out its limitations. This level of criticality is missing in Henri's work where there is a tendency to treat the different coaching models with reverence. An exposure to literary texts and to the kind of extension activity I am proposing would appear, at least in the anecdotal purview offered in this case study, to promote a student's critical gaze. The excerpt from Harry's project is notable for another reason: there is an evident willingness to understand the psychological motivations behind workplace behaviours, a zeal to engage empathetically with others, to "get under the staff member's skin", as Harry puts it. It is in the promotion of empathy that, as we will see later on in this paper, the reading of literary fiction can enhance coaching practice.

The differences between Harry's and Henri's work are indicative of wide-ranging improvements I discerned in the projects completed by students who had attempted the extension activity. Their projects had gone from providing vague accounts of how they had used coaching in their workplace (accounts filled with incomprehensible jargon) to interesting and inspired uses of coaching literature to solve problems. Applying their theories to a fictional context appeared to give them the confidence to write freely, to use the active voice and to engage the reader with a reasoned discussion of how they would confront the challenges posed by their fictional recalcitrant employee or disengaged client.

Writing skills

No matter how skilled a practitioner, no matter how much knowledge he has garnered, no matter how discernibly he has grown and flourished, if he cannot express himself with logic and simplicity, in language unencumbered by arcane verbiage and business jargon, his work counts for little. An additional advantage of the pedagogical intervention I describe here is its potential to improve students' written expression. In order to discourage students from using the formulaic language that more often than not circumscribes their practice, I encourage them in Matthew Arnold's (1974) memorable words "to know himself and the world" (p. 290). Knowing ourselves is predicated on recognising who we are as individuals: we know ourselves by cultivating independent thought and an individuality of style. But exhortations to write with greater clarity count for little without the necessary exposure to the kind of

writing we are looking for in students. Prescribing not just academic reading but literary fictional reading for students obliges them to pay attention to the mechanics of expression. Literary fiction calls our attention not simply to what is said but also to how it is said. To cultivate in students the realisation that form is at least as important as content is a beneficial side effect of the pedagogical activity outlined in this paper. Encouraging students to engage in writing that exhibits individuality, clarity and inventiveness and in reading beyond the mechanical, instrumentalised and lifeless prose of many of today's business-oriented screeds helps to foster independent intelligence and a more acute awareness of the crucial role language plays in our knowledge of the world.

Literature has frequently been regarded as having a number of well-regarded effects on its readers: "humanizing them, broadening their minds, alerting them to linguistic niceties, enlarging their sympathies, undermining their covert, ideological assumptions ..." (Attridge, 2004 p. 59), all of which I regard as useful educational by-products of reading. I regard the link between self-knowledge and clearer self-expression as paramount, indeed much more than a felicitous by-product of reading. The central question posed in Capobianco and Feldman's (2006) inquiry into teachers' action research – "[h]ow do I know if my students are learning any better?" – can be found in the most explicit data we have to hand: how students express themselves. Recently I asked this particular group of students to put into writing and share with each other how they would eventually disseminate their research when their degree was finished. John commented:

> There will be continued research into the topic by myself, to widen my knowledge of the on-boarding process which will include continuing with academic research as well as exploring opportunities with the internal on-boarding team.

There is nothing flagrantly wrong with this sentence that a change to the active voice couldn't cure, but I find an increasing reluctance among my professional practice students to abandon the passive voice. They read and communicate in the passive voice every day in their emails, memos, reports and projects. They have even admitted to me that they think the passive voice sounds "professional", "business-like", even "academic". One of the advantages of integrating fiction into a business curriculum is the writer's insistence on the active voice. Here Melville makes no mention of on-boarding in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, yet he is describing a nineteenth century version of the process:

> In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that the figure now – pallidly neat, respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby. After a few words, touching his qualifications I engaged him...

These are students engaged in finding solutions to the problems of poor productivity, of disengaged employees or of disgruntled clients in their companies. At first sight, using fiction in the learning process might seem a fanciful indulgence, but students learn from reading a story such as *Bartleby* the importance of pace, of keeping the reader's interest, of letting the agent of the sentence control the sentence, of *telling a story*, which is what they should be doing in their projects.

Coaching and narrative

Some may say my approach was unorthodox, and from a practitioner researcher's perspective, I was taking a risk (Dadds and Hart, 2001). There is a considerable body of research (Vogel, 2012; Drake, 2007; Drake and Lanahan, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1991) maintaining that stories help coaches and coachees think narratively: the narrative imagination captures the interplay between language and discourse and helps us to order our thoughts in a clearer, more coherent structure. If writing is the means to propel "us to come to know ourselves through the multiple voices our experiences take, to describe our contexts and histories as they shape the many minds and selves who define us and others" (Holly, 1989, p.78), then story and narrative have a central role in the coaching process. Drake's (2007) theory is that stories make visible our identity and are valuable for what they include and exclude. As we construct ourselves in the coaching process, we aim to create an orderly and meaningful narrative. When I asked John to recast his account of how he could better facilitate his company's recruitment process, I suggested he tell me "the story", that he aim for the rich, descriptive material that we ordinarily find in the best stories. He agreed that his narrative had been dry and impersonal and that reading *Bartleby* had been a powerful tool in getting him to understand how he could integrate the personal into his professional practice narrative. Unprompted, he had done some further reading on identity:

> I realised that I wanted to research the on-boarding process because we have not been able to get it right here all these years. Our induction process is off-putting largely because we neglect the role story plays in people's lives. William James (1892) made a distinction between the "I" and the "me". We treat potential staff like objects rather

than subjects with the will and the means to negotiate their own directions and to tell their stories. The narrator in *Bartleby* objectified Bartleby right from when he recalled the interview process. My on-board process model will focus on the role narrative plays in our work lives.

Indeed Drake (2007) posits that attending closely to how people tell their stories provides deep insights into their identities. Stories are the means by which we understand the world and how we make sense, in this instance, of the workplace. Foucault (1998) reminds us that stories are inextricably linked with power. The work place is the site of power struggles, hierarchical divisions and conversations that mask potent power tensions. Kevin, who was writing on what he called a "coachability model", a way of ascertaining an interviewee's long-term suitability in his company commented on the practicalities inherent in Melville's story:

> What I am discovering as I get further and further into my research is how crucial it is to give a voice to people we are interviewing. To a certain extent the interview is a power struggle with the interviewer with all the power and the interviewee with none. Too many of us ignore this elephant in the room and keep following the same formula. We fail to get "inside the head" of our prospective employees – therefore sometimes we lose good people or hire the wrong ones. In [*Bartleby*] the narrator never bothered to find out anything about Bartleby in the hiring process. It was all about him holding all the cards, his retaining his power. In contemporary terms he never took the time to see if he was coachable, to hear his story.

Many critics have commented on the ambiguity, the mystery of Bartleby – the fact that he had been treated as the flotsam of society, ignored and unheard. In the mid-twentieth century with the rise of psychoanalytical criticism, *Bartleby* became a study of alienation and catatonic withdrawal, a microcosmic representation of the harshness of American labour conditions, a symbolic treatment of how society depersonalises us. The psychiatrist R D Laing did not classify psychotic patients as examples of disease, but believed that odd behaviour could be meaningful as a kind of defensive weapon. Laing articulates the sense of existential awareness Melville exhibits through the relationship between the narrator/lawyer and Bartleby:

> Personal relatedness can exist only between human beings who are separate but who are not isolates. We are not isolates and we are not part of the same physical body.

> Here we have the paradox, the potentially tragic paradox, that our relatedness to
> others is an essential aspect of our being, as is our separateness, but any particular
> person is not a necessary part of our being. (Laing, 1960, p. 25).

Kevin has inadvertently picked up on Laing's comment on the division between people, and how such a division needs to be closed as much as possible to facilitate better working relations, and in Kevin's particular case, a more effective recruitment model that acknowledges the crucial role story and identity play in ascertaining a potential employee's openness to learning and coaching, what Kevin has termed "coachability". Like Kevin, I recognise how important it is to have "the freedom to innovate beyond the range of models provided by traditional social science or action research" (Dadds and Hart, 2001, p. 166). In order to create something innovative, the research practitioner must take risks. In my case, the risk was to encourage students to use literary fiction and especially to explore the action of fictional characters in order to make a rich engagement with the writers' ideas about work, morality and the existential self, as well as to articulate their ideas better. Not all students, though, want to be methodologically challenged: using fiction can be a step too far in the inventive stakes.

Coaching, therapy, resistance and Bartleby

In 1853 Herman Melville introduced readers "to perhaps one of the most tragic characters in American literature" (Schultz, 2011, p. 584). *Bartleby the Scivener, A Story of Wall-Street* has been widely analysed over the decades as a study of someone "walled in" by his job, as a highly political story of passive resistance influenced by Thoreau's (2000) *Civil Disobedience*, as a warning against using alcohol to escape from life's problems, as an American imperative for self-determination, and an unsolved riddle about humanity. Space does not afford me the luxury to elaborate in detail the vast number of this dark story's critical interpretations, but my students were able to mine the relationships in the story for coaching material. In fact, I chose *Bartleby* for the students to read because the story typified a range of dysfunctional personalities, the kinds a coach might encounter in the office, characters who could be role models of apathy, anger and avoidance, and therefore ideal subjects for a sustainable coaching intervention.

Grant and Hartley (2013) surveyed a range of coaching skills in the workplace and found that one of the most important influences on organisational behaviour was identifying positive role models. Melville's story of a lawyer/narrator faced with a group of dysfunctional legal

document copiers or clerks, and in particular, his new hire Bartleby, who soon starts to say little beyond "I prefer not to" when asked to carry out any of his tasks, seemed the embodiment of a case study for coaching students. Although Bartleby's case is extreme (he regresses to a state of catatonia and has to be forcibly removed from the premises and then dies by starving himself in New York's Tombs), as a fictional character he demonstrates the type of a complex, challenging individual who students could very well encounter. I asked students the question: if Bartleby were a member of your staff, how would you coach him? In terms of the limitations of my study, exactly half of the 12 students read the story and responded. Even though the two stories (the students read both) are short, the students had full-time jobs with a high degree of managerial responsibility, and the exigencies of the course were such that the ones who did not read or comment on the stories felt that they could not commit the time to do so. Of course not all students read fiction, and from my experience, they have not been exposed to how to read fiction, one of the shortcomings of the UK educational system which I will touch upon later in the paper. The widespread disinclination towards and lack of preparation for the reading of literary fiction among students were two factors that persuaded me not to make the assignment a mandatory part of the module. The fact that exactly half of the students in the module took on the extension activity voluntarily had the added advantage, from the perspective of this case study, of creating a control group of students who did not complete the study, a chance occurrence that allowed the benefits of the pedagogical intervention to emerge through a comparative analysis of the two groups. But the successful results achieved by the extension activity are such that I am now able to set out a more compelling case, both to students and to my colleagues, for making the assignment compulsory for future cohorts.

Perhaps because my question focussed on the lawyer's sense of agency, implying a comment on his decisions (or lack of decisions) and impotence in the face of Bartleby's passive resistance, the students all identified with the lawyer and his lack of leadership qualities. Senior managers (who the students were) have identified leadership styles as being one of the most important influences on organisational culture (Grant and Hartley, 2013), and students invariably integrate a study of leadership within their coaching projects. Tim's response captured the essence of the students' engagement with the story:

> In coaching terms the lawyer makes little effort to understand Bartleby. He dictates all of the employment parameters creating what I would call "bad stress" in Bartleby. "Good stress" is when people are rushed and maybe even overworked or work at a

maddening pace but they still have autonomy and control over what they do. The "bad stress" that leads Bartleby to his death is the lawyer seeing him as a machine-like tool, someone with no independent thoughts, even an automaton – someone totally alienated. It is crucial as managers that we see our employees as equals – the coaching process has to start with that reality.

Garland-Thomson (2004, p. 786) makes the point that Bartleby is a "cipher" who is never explained by Melville. Therefore our only entry into the story is through the lawyer's narration. Tim has picked up on the lack of commonality between the employer and the employee, the lawyer and Bartleby which Garland-Thomson identifies as the typical manifestation of the "impersonal rational workplace relations which developed in a wage-labor market" (p. 788). Has the situation changed that much in the nearly 170 years since Melville wrote his story? The rise of coaching as a means of addressing, if not the bleak, empty existence of workplace relations, but of exploring how to prevent for employees the slippery descent into ordinary, mind-numbing conditions of ennui and lack of motivation would suggest not. Most of the thinking and writing on coaching is rooted in the field of psychology (Gray, 2006), a significance Stephen was alert to:

> Although it isn't common, we do come across employees with manic-depression or border-line personality disorders. It may not be our role as coaches to deal with, for example, someone with narcissism, but we need to recognise its prevalence and explore ways of dealing with it.

Stephen does not brand Bartleby a narcissist, but he has made the connection between coaching and therapy. Mander (2005, p. 217) sees fiction as a "goldmine" for a therapist and a natural link between theory and practice. She claims that fictional characters demonstrate the complexity and ambiguities of an individual, and that Melville's creations such as Bartleby are fascinating because they remind her of some of her most difficult and perverse patients. His narratives, "like therapy, concern a two person relationship – one who is attempting to understand the other who resists comprehension" (p. 218). And if therapy and coaching share commonalities, there are many times a coachee "resists comprehension". Before Freud, Melville "believed in and described the action of powerful unconscious forces in the psyche" (p. 225). For coaching students, Bartleby's defiant resistance and rigid, narcissistic character coupled with the lawyer's confusion and bemusement in the face of his employee's (non-) actions can be a rich and riveting case study requiring meticulous attention

to detail. Reading the story engages our imagination, triggers our reflection on power dynamics and helps us to focus on the meaning of the elements of the coaching process not necessarily defined in a skills-based model: entering a story helps us to explore another's interiority, another's individual spirit. Moreover, exposing students to the eloquent writing in a Melville story allows them to attend to the importance of the arrangement of words in a piece of writing.

John Cheever's *The Swimmer*: embattled heroes all

Reflection lies at the heart of the professional practice inquiry, and students have been able to conceptualise their practice by using Dewey's (1910) principles, especially in carefully considering their prior assumptions and biases in their problem solving. Reflection becomes a way of being a sales manager: students recognise the need to frame problems from different viewpoints and to be explicit about challenging their biases. Of course the challenging of bias and embracing of distinct viewpoints are activities promoted by the reading of literary fiction, as we have already seen. Alan's project linked professionalism in sales to ethics. His thesis was that his company and the subsidiary companies involved on the programme would be able to "professionalise sales" by being seen as ethically minded, more transparent businesses that showcased their values and principles, making such qualities the defining characteristics of the sales process. He explained:

> Due to the consultative nature of sales within the industry, a key element to an organisation's strategy is the need for salespeople to build up a trusting and reliable relationship with their client.

He decided to focus on the causes of mis-selling and unethical sales behaviour, emphasising that he needed to attend to his assumptions on why these behaviours occur. His research question became – to what extent can a values based educational programme impact the performance of sales people? He knew from his experience that there had been an insufficient focus on values and modelling behaviours in the area of sales, but he had also known that in order to explore this problem of unethical practice with the thoroughness it deserves, his search needed to involve analysis, keen observation, flexibility and open-mindedness (Dewey, 1910). This deep reflection in which research questions are asked about experience can be illuminated by reading fiction. The problems posed by a writer such as Melville or Cheever enable the reader to examine different viewpoints and to mediate creatively between practice and theory. Reading how a fictional character is faced with a difficult decision can

help a student to have a firmer grasp on societal influences, and by imaginatively entering another's experience, can challenge the a priori assumptions Dewey discusses.

John Cheever's *The Swimmer* (2007 [1964]) is the story of a man who swims home through the backyard pools of the conspicuously affluent Westchester, New York. Like *Bartleby*, *The Swimmer* has been the subject of myriad often-conflicting critical interpretations. Cervo (1991) claims that the protagonist Neddy Merrill is an "earthbound ghost" trapped in the pagan underworld, battling through Stygian pools to get to his home, Hades (p. 49). The story is Cheever's comment on the banality of Western civilisation as well as an avowal that only in knowing death can we have a full awareness of life. Blythe and Sweet (1989) invite us to see Neddy's "Watery Odyssey" as parallel with Ponce de Leon's fruitless search for the fountain of youth (p. 557). The story is replete with classical allusions to pilgrimage, cartography and exploration, and its underlying theme is "the futility of attempts to reclaim one's youth" (p. 552). Matthews (1992) has Neddy as a man lost in time, impervious to the ravages of time – both personal and social – who has an "unbounded faith in the celebrated American ideal of self-determination and in the concomitant myth of guaranteed success" but is at odds with society (p. 101).

Perhaps the link between the story of a delusional, spurned alcoholic swimming through eight miles of suburban pools and a group of sales managers' investigations into coachability, client centricity and professionalising sales by ethical education seems tenuous at best, but *The Swimmer*, like all great fiction, is able to accommodate both personal and universal readings. Kennedy (2015) makes the point that the story may not make perfect sense to him but it "sings to my heart rather to my brain" (p. 9). This phrase is a compelling image since it encapsulates a fundamental aspect of the students' projects: their inquiries are motivated by a self-averred passionate desire to change their practice for the better. They tend to conceive their projects as metaphors – Alan's wish to see ethics as a cornerstone of the sales curriculum is a "moral crusade" for him. Dave's exploration of a how a long-standing family business can embrace new technologies is "a journey to bring about awareness and knowledge". Both Alan and Dave perceive opportunities for examining coaching practice through reading *The Swimmer*. They also claimed that it spoke to the heart: it was a moving tale.

Alan immediately extracted the ethical dimensions of the story, stating, "How we care for our staff is of equal importance to our ethical dealings with clients". Both students believed

Neddy's story could provide the basis for a case study of how managers need to understand, empathise and coach individuals on their team. Alan provided an overall, strategic coaching strategy:

> Ned has lost his wife. I would therefore on managing his return to work, look out for signs of depression such as change of appearance, forgetfulness, mood swings, and alcohol abuse. I would encourage him to speak to me about how he feels, what he fears and how he can be helped through a difficult time. I would have noticed by this time he was both drinking too heavily and taking of too much swimming/exercise. Through coaching I would help him see that he need not swim that distance in one day – it would be better to do less in order to maintain his strength and focus. I would help him to set targets to get back to where he desires to be. I would coach him through his fears, trying to help him find the answer he is searching for within himself, and reminding him to avoid those who offer judgement without understanding. It would be important for him to see and acknowledge that things have gone wrong and he has made mistakes. But he can recover and rediscover himself.

Although Alan's strategy is eminently practical, he touches upon what Spinelli (2012) calls "death anxiety", a theme featured in the existential-phenomenological therapy Spinelli explores (p. 10). Most business coaching models do not follow an existential-phenomenological model, but coaching, rooted in therapy, can use aspects of this philosophical model proven to be highly effective in examining "central human dilemmas such as meaning and purpose, choice, freedom, guilt, and the anxieties of temporal existence" (p. 5). It is not my intention to delve into the complexities of this experiential therapeutic model but to demonstrate the role literature can play in illuminating the challenges that most of us are likely to encounter as well as reveal how coaching can select from its roots a range of rich and influential models of assisting people in making sense of their problematic lives.

Dave drew Neddy into the family dynamics present at his firm:

> One of the things I have learned is the importance of not being emotionally involved at work. There are family dynamics at play that keep people emotionally embroiled and tend to affect many decisions we make for the worse. Like the people in my firm, Neddy can't see that the world has changed and he has to embrace that change rather than swim away from it. He, like others in my firm, needs an unemotional, structured

series of conversations with goal setting imperatives to look at the future of the firm and more importantly his future.

Neddy's existential suffering, deprived self-awareness, suburban nightmare or "region of damnable betrayal in Dante [...] transformed into the realm of superbly ignorant self-betrayal, which Cheever portrays as subsuming everyman thrashing about in the oblivion of his nowadays" (Kozikowski, 1993, p. 374) have only been hinted at by Alan's and Dave's accounts of reading *The Swimmer*. Their reading, however, enlarged the understanding of their inquiries. They were able to improve their practice by asking questions of the text that could be applied to their own practice. My interest is in examining what high-quality coaching programmes could look like. In order to provide the utmost value to a coaching programme, we must recognise the inherent worth of looking at the worlds that help us make sense of ourselves – and, by extension, the helpless confusion and disconnect of a character like Neddy.

Implications for Business and the University

Half of the student cohort responded to this "literary coaching" exercise. What does this imply about the students who did not respond? First, I am not surprised by the 50% take-up. I have been creating extension activities such as this one to supplement student learning over the past few years and a 50% response has been fairly consistent. As well as with whole-group discussions, I aim to support student learning with one-to-one Skype conversations about their progress. I asked students why they had not elected to read any of the short fiction. "Lack of time" was the uniform response. Of course, working full time and expecting to complete a substantial project in two terms preclude the leisure to do anything that is not assessed. Second, some students are not interested in reading fiction. It may be that they simply have no interest in something they see as "imaginary" as one non-participant called fiction. It may also be that the reading of fiction is neither encouraged nor even taught at school.

This particular group of students ranged from their early 30s to late 40s, all male, all UK based, with no previous higher education experience (and some with little post-16). By their own admission, they had not been exposed to the "humanities": the hope of gaining a postgraduate qualification in coaching and the opportunity to improve their business were foremost in their minds. Beyond those objectives, their expectations were vague – many of them commenting that they had always seen university as elitist, an endeavour geared for the

most part to "the privileged". My role had been to facilitate the crafting of their projects, namely, to introduce them to literature reviews, a range of appropriate methodologies, how to collect and analyse data and how to write critically and reflectively. I saw my role as a university lecturer as one that went beyond these at times prescriptive tasks. I envisaged "success" in gaining their master's qualifications rather differently.

Collini (2012) challenges the idea that the purpose of a university is to contribute to the GDP of a nation. He takes an extract from the 2003 White Paper on Education which I will partially transcribe here: "We see a higher education sector which meets the needs of the economy in terms of trained people, research and technology transfer". (p. 153). He makes the point that universities in the UK are "badly demoralised" because their focus is "to turn out people and ideas capable of making money" (p. 154). The professional practice students with whom I work have already made their money – they enjoy successful careers and professional prestige. I have the ideal opportunity to enlarge what professional practice in the context of a university education means: I am able to persuade students of the value of reading widely from the humanities, from sampling writing in history, literature and philosophy. Instead of digesting the latest business-speak bestseller extolling the most expedient model of leadership, students have been introduced to Machiavelli's *The Prince* and have been able to debate the polemics and politics of 15th century Florence. In a recent discussion of team malaise, we read a chapter from Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* (1973) and explored the tensions inherent in the modern myth of progress. I want students to go beyond the conventional view of business education as "training".

Much of the professional practice curriculum emphasises the attributes of training. The learning outcomes for the coaching module I teach include the expectation that students "explicate their model for working with others" and "demonstrate leadership skills". Particularly in coaching, which is ripe with the possibility of enlarging the curriculum in an imaginative way, we need to reach far beyond a university education justified in terms of the attainment of skills. Both my students and other university students are "required to operate within a narrowly financial or commercial notion of 'efficiency' which is equated with increased output at reduced cost" (Collini, 2012, p. 134). My students will invariably be subjected to these strictures. Instead, university education should offer these students (and all students) an exposure to uncovering truths about the human condition through an attentive reading of literary texts which is an opportunity to engage intellectually with scholarly ideas.

Finally, I noted the crucial role good writing skills play in education. If introducing coaching students to fictional characters helps in developing creative coaching interventions but does nothing to benefit their writing skills, the introduction to fiction is not enough: the most novel ideas incoherently expressed are ultimately fruitless. The challenges of a practice-based inquiry are many, but by getting students to explore issues of core identity, as well as helping them to develop better writing skills, are at the heart of any practice-based inquiry. Ultimately, by exposing students to the imaginative possibilities of fiction they will be better able to comprehend the reality in which they live and to express that reality with greater clarity.

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