Navigating the Moral Compass: Ethical Dimensions in Coach Education

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ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines the ethical dimensions and challenges in assessment within coach education, emphasizing the heutagogical approach and the critical role of learner-centred assessment. We explored the complex interplay between different assessment methods - norm-referenced, criteria-referenced, and ipsative - and their ethical implications in the context of varying institutional, programmatic, and individual learner demands. Central to this exploration is the ethical dilemma faced by educators in balancing these competing needs and determining what constitutes ‘right’ in the domain of assessment. The over-emphasis on the assessment of learning is scrutinized, particularly its focus on meeting predefined standards and competencies through “objective” evaluation. In contrast, assessment for learning is presented as a formative approach that provides continuous insights into the learners’ development, enabling educators to tailor their teaching strategies. When educators assess their students’ learning, they have a window into the effectiveness of their teaching. The authors endorse the stance that considers assessment as learning, an approach that actively engages learners through self-reflection, goal setting, and direct observation, emphasizing the learning process as part of the outcome.

Keywords: heutagogy, assessment, ethics, coaching education, dialogic orientation quadrant

Type of session: Panel discussion followed by a Q&A

Introduction

A rather allegorical question, “How do you measure water?” invites one to reflect on the complex interplay of contextual factors before answering it. One’s logical response would require further
information, such as “What is the water for?” Simply offering a measuring tool, like a ruler or a thermometer, without asking such a question and understanding the context would be inadequate. This simple illustration was useful to consider in our presentation at the Coaching Ethics Forum in 2023, where we focused on the ethical dimensions of coaching education, particularly in the assessment of learner progress and the efficacy of measuring tools. Our wish was to provoke conversation to consider why we assess, what assessment should measure, and why that measure is important.

We began our presentation with the notion of “skholē”, a Greek root word for the familiar English word “school” with somewhat distinguished meanings: leisure, rest, or ease. The ancient Greeks referred to this as a place where truth is the focus of inquiry and learning. Over time, it came to mean a place where learners linger with each other and engage in dialogue and reflection, the art that Stelter (2018) describes as the essence of the coaching relationship. As we reflect on the learning spaces we host in coaching education, in what ways do we uphold that art with our learners, especially in the practice of assessment? When does assessment begin? Who decides what's measured? How is the practice both interactive and iterative so that it remains transparent to both the learner and the educator? These questions barely begin to address the growing tension in the current coaching industry.

What is the dominant discourse in the current coaching industry and educational institutions on the purpose and methods of assessment where coaching educators may experience the tension between institutional requirements and individual learning capacity? As Brookfield noted, “We acknowledge the importance of evaluation like we resolve to exercise more regularly. Both activities are significant and necessary, but both, for whatever good or bad reasons, are rarely implemented” (1982, p.95). The ethical considerations extend to determining what ‘right’ looks like in assessment and who gets to make these decisions - the educators, accreditation bodies, or the institutions themselves. This consideration challenges us to reconsider traditional pedagogical approaches to measuring, especially in practices like coaching and coaching education, where one’s learning and progress are afforded in their learning context and occasioned rather than caused in a fundamentally emergent fashion (Phelps, 2004; Moon, 2020).

Theoretical Considerations on Learning Assessments

We presented three perspectives on learning assessment available and useful in Adult Education: Assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning. Positioning coaching as a

transformational learning process, we wanted to address not only how we measure the outcome efficacy for our clients but also the process efficacy and congruence for our learners.

1. Assessment of Learning

Assessment of learning often focuses on summative results of learner progress - whether learners pass an exam or meet set standards. Various norm-based or criterion-based assessments are designed as external points of reference to rate or rank the learner. Traditional pedagogical methods in instructor-centred and curriculum-centred approaches offer standardized measures of competence. Often, these summative assessments position educators as the experts who decide what to assess and what constitutes a “good” outcome, whether a quality of writing or demonstrated skills.

Positioning educators as the sole arbiters of knowledge may reinforce a power dynamic that may potentially undermine learner autonomy and self-efficacy. In addition, standardized assessments may not account for individual differences and contextual information that may privilege or disadvantage certain groups of learners.

2. Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning provides ongoing insights into learners’ development with a focus on formative purpose, informing both learners and educators to adjust teaching and learning strategies accordingly. In formative assessment, the teacher and the student work together, with both engaged in the learning process. The focus is on learning outcomes that are clearly defined with clear expectations of each in the process—a mutuality in the relationship. More emphasis is placed on individual learners’ progress within a given curriculum, gaining popularity as self-directed learning grew among adult learners who were assumed to have more autonomy and “take responsibility of identifying learning needs and exploring the strategies in which the learning needs would be met” (Nikolovska et al., 2019, p.295).

Immediate feedback is often used as an essential tool to recalibrate the learner’s strategies based on their current skills, knowledge, and practice in order to determine the next steps in their learning. Jenny Rogers (2016) highlights this when she encourages coaches to walk through a topic raised during the coaching conversation rather than just talk about it. In both summative and formative assessments, it is important to determine standards during the early developmental phases that provide the necessary indicators and criteria for assessment and evaluation so that learning experiences and learner progress are continuously examined and improved (Saltiel & Russo, 2001).
While it aims to promote learner autonomy and self-efficacy, formative assessment may require certain conditions to be sustainable. As it is designed to accommodate diverse learning needs and progress, it may depend on each educator’s capacity to provide consistent, fair, and transparent feedback. This approach requires significant time and resources that may not be readily available in cultures of established institutions that prioritize summative assessments. Balancing the need for standardized assessment with the individualized approach of formative assessment may add pressure on both learners and educators if the institutional culture does not provide adequate support to sustain the practice.

3. Assessment as Learning

Assessment as learning invites learners to actively design and engage in their learning process using relevant devices, activities, and tools, including assessments. Learners not only direct how they learn something, but they also engage in discovering what they want to learn as they co-construct their knowledge. In our current social landscape, where access to information is no longer a main inhibitory factor to learning, self-determined learners adopt a self-referential approach that allows them to measure their progress based on personal benchmarks rather than external standards.

Educators implementing self-determined learning may encounter unique challenges beyond the pressures and resource constraints associated with formative assessments. First, this approach presupposes the evaluative capacity of learners—their awareness, ability, and availability—to monitor their progress and engage in ongoing self-evaluation. Second, it depends on each educator’s ability to facilitate meta-cognitive activities with the learner, essentially teaching them ‘how to learn.’ This requires educators to not only impart knowledge but also to develop learners’ skills in self-reflection, goal-setting, and self-regulation. Successfully navigating these challenges is crucial for fostering an environment where self-determined learning can not only sustain but thrive.

We introduced this concept of self-determined learning as a necessary consideration in how we use assessments in coaching and coach education. This approach, also known as heutagogy (pronounced hyoo-uhl-goh-gee), was introduced by Hase and Kenyon (2000) in the context of adult education. Derived from the Ancient Greek word heúrēka, meaning “I have found (it),” heutagogy suggests that “humans are inherently, but not automatically, proactive, inclined to growth, development, and optimal actions” (Faiella, 2013, p.116). This approach is particularly pertinent in coaching, a field that emphasizes individual progress and self-determined and self-directed learning. Consequently, this leads
to the question: What might be the most appropriate assessments to gauge such learning and progress?

**Practical Tools for Learner-Centred Approach**

As one of the practical examples of learning assessment in coaching education, we advocate using video recordings of learners throughout their development. Producing video recordings of their conversations before formally learning the particular coaching techniques serves as an important baseline or personal benchmark of their skills. Subsequent recordings throughout their learning are used as progress markers in their ipsative assessment (using self as reference) on an ongoing basis. Discovering what they learned and what they want to learn next informs both the content and method of learning, both requiring and fostering learner autonomy as it situates learners as crafters of knowledge (Moon, 2020). Using these assessment strategies encourages learners to become observers of their own progress and reflect on their own growth—important and valuable practice for becoming better at their craft.

To assist their learning, educators may use different learning devices, models, and processes to encourage learners to “learn how to learn.” Moon (2019) illustrates a heuristic of interaction, the **Dialogic Orientation Quadrant (DOQ)**, as one of those examples of encouraging learners to become observers of their own work. Using this model, she invites learners to organize and map the clients’ narratives in four distinct areas: preferred future, resourceful past, troubled past, and dreaded future. A simple mapping activity, while they watch their own recordings, makes the “interfluential” nature of meaning-making visible (Moon, 2022). Other strategies to encourage “learning to learn” are using pauses during lectures, deliberate simulations, and group activities as a collective meaning-making process. Asking learners to both reflect in action and on action to share with others becomes valuable not only for the learners to define and refine their progress but also for the educators to curate useful resources for the learners and capture emergent wisdom from the reflective discussions. This critical reflection also applies to educators’ development as their assessment of learners’ progress provides a window into the efficacy of their teaching (Brookfield, 2018).

**Conclusion**

It may be well worth considering what Stelter (2007) calls developing the art of lingering in dialogue. How does it translate to what educators do with learners in the learning space? On the surface level, it may look like not being in a hurry, not being pressured to agree, or speaking to each other with curiosity and wonder about something that matters to them. Such a sense of wonder may lead to questions, not
for seeking immediate answers but for pursuing deeper meanings and stretching the worlds of those in conversations together.

In conclusion, we invite coaching educators to reflect on the role of a teacher (or instructor, facilitator, or educator) in a heutagogical context to become more self-aware of biases, assumptions, and practices in assessment. We encourage coaching educators to begin with the basic question: What is the purpose of the assessment? Responding to the rapidly changing landscape of how people learn in the twenty-first century, how do we foster and leverage learners’ curiosities in their progress while deepening and broadening their learning experience? What are we carrying forward from the traditional way of transmitting and translating knowledge? What are we leaving behind so that we can afford the collaborative learning context where learners curate and craft knowledge? It is our hope that these questions will continue to guide our own growth as coaching educators in this pivotal time.

References


