

Invited Paper

Where the Roads Meet: Dialogue and Coaching-Related Research

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The International Coaching Federation (ICF) held the Third Annual ICF Coaching Research Symposium on November 9, 2005 in San Jose, California. The theme “Coaching Research: Building Dialogue” set the stage as both the topic and the process encouraged throughout the event. “The theme of the Third ICF Coaching Research Symposium highlights the importance of bringing voices from differing backgrounds and experiences together to frame the coaching-related research dialogue as broadly and deeply as possible” (Page and Stein, 2006, p. 141).

Input from the community of ICF members interested in the research conference mandated the dialogic approach. Participants at the Second ICF Coaching Research Symposium in November, 2004 requested, “more interaction—more time for questions from the audience, more input, more dialogue” (Program Committee Notes, 2005, p. 2). The Program Committee for the Third Symposium responded by creating an event designed to “foster(s) dialogues among and across constituencies to promote engagement in coaching research and cross fertilization among: training/education providers, practitioners, researchers, field-builders, and those who work with multiple capacities” (Program Committee Notes, 2005, p. 4). Specifically, planners hoped to:

- Encourage more and better research opportunities among coaching researchers.
- Stimulate get-acquainted conversations about research between researchers and practitioners.
- Further interest on the part of coach educators to include research results and research methods in coach training and education.
- Encourage the inclusion of research in ICF conferences and in the global conversation about the field of coaching studies.
- Share research findings as a means of enhancing the quality of coaching practice.
- Incorporate the practice of research in order to further the development of coaching as a profession (Page, personal communication, April 2006).

In this paper we examine the use of the dialogic process at the Third Annual ICF Coaching Research Symposium in terms of its impact on building the coaching research community. Specifically, we are interested in exploring three questions using examples from the sessions of the day: 1) Can dialogue and research practices intersect? 2) If so, where and how might dialogue and research intersect? 3) How might dialogue be

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used to further coaching research? We begin by presenting the challenges of the daylong Symposium before introducing several theoretical approaches to dialogue then discuss the potential intersection between dialogue and research. The paper concludes with a framework for the use of dialogue within a scholarly community – where it might be used to best effect and what conditions might be necessary to support a further development of that application.

The authors approached the development of this paper as a written dialogic exploration with each other, with the cited documents and with our individual direct experiences. One of us—Peg—assumed the role of designated listener throughout the 2005 Symposium event, gathering and recording data from the presentations and interactive sessions. The other two authors—Francine and John—served on the planning team for the Symposium and were presenters.

Challenge of the Day

The challenge for the Symposium organizers, presenters, and participants was to create an environment that encouraged dialogue in a community of people with diverse training and perspectives. Anthony Grant and Richard Zackon (2004) in their study of the ICF found a wide range of backgrounds among coaches including “business consultancy, management, teaching, workplace training, learning and development, clinical, organizational and sport psychology” (p. 1). In addition to the natural diversity of coaching backgrounds, the 2005 (Third) Symposium was attended by participants with a variety of needs:

- Coach practitioners who were looking for ways to ground their practices on an evidence-based platform while finding new ideas for marketing their practice.
- Scholar-practitioners, who sought ways to improve as coaches, find opportunities to further the practice in order to contribute evidence to the practice.
- Scholars who presented or considered research that “provides practitioners with solid grounding in ethics and protocols of data collection and treatment to ensure the integrity and validity of coaching research” (Campone, 2004, p. 10).
- Coaching educators who wanted information so they could further the effort to integrate research more thoroughly into the educational and training curricula for coaches (Page and Stein, 2006).

The dialogue focus of the program was proposed as a means of exploring the question posed by one participant who commented: “Are coaching and research naturally in conflict? Coaching is about being comfortable not knowing while research is coming to know what is not known.”

Different Faces of Dialogue

A guiding focus and technology for the Symposium was the introduction and

application of dialogue as a framework for discourse. Symposium organizers designed sessions and suggested that presenters practice a dialogic approach. Communication scholar-practitioner Barnett Pearce was the keynote speaker. He introduced key tenets of dialogue and challenged Symposium participants to engage in the practice of dialogue throughout the event. At the end of the day, Pearce facilitated and guided participants in a reflective dialogue designed to consider the research presented, make meaning of the experience, and consider possible further actions. Pearce and Pearce (2003) have stated, “When communicating dialogically, one can listen, ask questions, present one’s ideas, argue, debate, etc. The defining characteristic of dialogic communication is that all of these speech acts are done in ways that hold one’s own position but allow others space to hold theirs, and are profoundly open to hearing others’ positions without needing to oppose or assimilate them” (Dialogue from the perspective of CMM, ¶19).

Before proceeding, we will briefly review three aspects of dialogue which set it apart as a platform for the expanding conversations between scholar and practitioner: its open nature, its position as a way of being, and the collective intelligence that comes from synergistic thinking.

Open Nature of Dialogue

Dialogue is an exploratory process. Though theorists differ about the opportunity and amount of structure necessary for dialogue, there are no firm rules for dialogic discourse. David Bohm (1991) believed that dialogue is concerned with providing a space within which attention can be given for dialogue. It is a process of collective learning which takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship, and creativity can arise. In Bohm’s approach, there are five guiding principles: 1) The suspension of thoughts, impulses and judgments; 2) Group size limited to between twenty and forty people; 3) Two hour optimum time frame; 4) Facilitated conversation between equals; and 5) No subject should be excluded.

Mikhail Bahktin saw dialogue as a spontaneous occurrence, “because the overall outcome of any exchange cannot be traced back to the intentions of any of the individuals involved, the ‘dialogical reality’ or ‘space’ constructed between them is experienced as an ‘external reality’, a ‘third agency’ with its own (ethical) demands and requirements” (Shotter, 2004, p. 217). While a third theorist and philosopher, Martin Buber, understood dialogue as a “rare occasion when true conversation develops in its pure essence, between partners who have turned to each other in truth, talking with radical openness free from any intentions of merely pretending” (Institute for Cooperative Research into Culture and Economic Systems, 2001, p. 7).

A Way of Being

Dialogue happens in what Ken Cissna and Ron Anderson (1998) call “moments of meeting” in which people respond to others as “Thou” rather than “it,” using Martin Buber’s (1958) terms, and find themselves transformed because the “I” of “I-thou” is not the same as the “I” of “I-it.” Such moments cannot be made to happen or delivered on schedule as a package, “dialogue thrives at the margins of human agency—those

ill-defined situations in which we imagine we are somewhat in control but in which our plans surprisingly can blend into the unexpected.... Dialogue, which cannot be mandated, rarely happens accidentally either” (Anderson, Cissna, and Arnett, 1994, p. xxi). Dialogue cannot be forced, programmed, or legislated. Instead, it is a process that must be entered into freely, which demands “an awareness of the moment and necessitates maintaining a reflexive habit of being constantly alert to the centrifugal force towards free and open communication” (Bathurst, 2004, Concluding Summary, ¶ 2). The vigilance of this awareness requires more than an act—it actually becomes a way of being. “It is not concerned with deliberately trying to alter or change behavior nor to get the participants to move to a predetermined goal” (Bohm, 1991, p. 4).

Collective Intelligence

William Isaacs (1999) refers to dialogue as “collective intelligence,” a key indicator of synergistic thinking. Collective intelligence leads to collective improvisation and creativity because we are smarter together than we are on our own. These collective thoughts create a complex network an “ecology of thought” that is the matrix that informs our view of the world and the way we solve problems (Isaacs, 1993).

According to Maurice Friedman, Buber’s notion of wholeness is manifested through the “Thou” by incorporating the collective intelligence generated from the inseparable relationships between people. Bakhtin further supports the notion of collective intelligence by suggesting that people will often spontaneously respond to one another when interacting (Shotter, 2004).

Bohm (1991) believed that as members of a group suspend their own thoughts, impulses, and judgments in order to give careful attention, listen closely and see the meaning underlying of their response, incredible growth is possible. The overall process can be slowed down to unearth deeper meanings and subtle distortions the result being a “new kind of coherent, collective intelligence” (Bohm, 1991, p.7). The thoughts of the whole—all those involved throughout the event—provide opportunities that would not have been seen by the individual.

Setting a Stage for Dialogue

The stage for dialogue was set at the Third ICF Coaching Research Symposium through various structures, resources, and programmatic initiatives such as the keynote speaker, designated listeners, group discussions, and panel discussions. By creating the space and bringing together professionals expecting meaningful interaction, a social structure was fashioned to create an opportunity for shared meaning through dialogic interaction between scholars, practitioners and educators. In order to help create such structure, the program incorporated many forms of engagement—the process wall for stream of consciousness expression, formal sessions of research findings, experiential opportunities in the areas of appreciative inquiry, posters of ideas not being presented, conversational and reflective opportunities between sessions and self-selected topic groups for dialogic opportunities within the subject of individual choice.

In his keynote speech Pearce sought to establish mindfulness about the way in which dialogue is created, a vocabulary to be used and a stage for a dialogic reality. At the conclusion of the Symposium, participants were asked to share their thoughts about the dialogue. Many described a dialogic reality through such comments as: “Words matter,” “we considered silence marking the digestion of the verbal contribution to the next,” and “organizations move to that to which they study.”

The dialogue within the eight self-created groups centered on the sharing of individual perspectives and interpretations within the field of coaching as a whole. The topic groups reported various levels of dialogic experience. One group followed a Bohmian approach of formal time for reflection, using a water bottle to define and formalize each speaker’s turn. A diverse group of scholars, practitioner and educators including professionals from Europe and Asia, lived the experience by addressing the diversity within the ICF organization while recognizing the diversity among themselves.

Dialogue and Research: Is There a Point Where They Intersect?

A core premise of dialogue is that “When we are able to create a situation in which participants feel respected and confident that their interests will be protected, they often welcome the opportunity to speak more fully than usual about the things that matter most to them, and in the process, both they and those listening to them discover new richness in their stories and find openings to move forward together” (Pearce and Pearce, 2003, *Coherence: Making meaning together*, para. 3). The engagement of individuals and groups throughout the day of the Symposium appears to bear out this premise. While, the goals of the program were ambitious and far-reaching, we feel confident in suggesting that the program did promote conversation between researchers and practitioners, as evidenced by the lively exchanges between presenters and participants at several of the breakout sessions (e.g., The Relational Flow Model and the Evidence-Based Coaching session). Groups formed in the closing session for open dialogue on a variety of topics, including the dissemination of research in accessible ways.

Conversation notwithstanding, it remains unclear from the program outcome where or if the practices of dialogue and the practices of research can intersect in some meaningful way to further the profession of coaching. William Isaacs’ (1999) view of dialogue as a means of harnessing the collective intelligence of a group rests on understanding three languages: the language of meaning (ideas); the language of feelings (which inform the aesthetics of a discussion and impact the thinking of the participants); and the language of action (what we do with the bigger understanding we’ve gained). This view of dialogue suggests that a nexus of dialogue and scholarly work can be found when the ideas and feelings which emerge in dialogue are moved to action and examined in a structured and disciplined way.

Donald Schön (1987) describes the “rigor vs. relevance” dilemma in the social sciences as the tension between remaining “on the high ground where [scholars] can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor or...descend to the swamp of important problems and nonrigorous inquiry” (p. 3). Victor Friedman

(2001) advocates action sciences as a means of bridging that gap. He defines action science as “a form of social practice which integrates both the production and use of knowledge for the purpose of promoting learning with and among individuals whose work is characterized by uniqueness, uncertainty and instability” (p. 159).

Do these characteristics—uniqueness, uncertainty and instability—apply to the field of coaching? With respect to uniqueness, the field of coaching has taken great pains to distinguish its practice from psychotherapy and counseling (Williams and Davis, 2002) and related fields. Coaching is further characterized by uncertainty and instability in being an evolving field with multidisciplinary roots (Brock—this issue), and a field in which the pace of growth in practice far exceeds the development of coaching specific scholarship on theory and practice (Grant, 2003; Stober, 2004).

Action Science as a Point of Intersection

We propose that there is an intersection of dialogue and scholarship and that the place of intersection is action science. What would be needed to capitalize on the congruencies and move coaching dialogue forward in the service of coaching research? Friedman (2001) discusses four key elements of action science, which we suggest are consistent with Isaacs’ notion of harnessing collective intelligence.

The first key feature of action science is creating *communities of inquiry within communities of practice*. This means that, in addition to research on coaching—research from Schön’s (1987) “high ground”—the coaching community must engage in research in coaching which may be both important and, when conducted purposefully, can be rigorous. In order for meaningful communities of inquiry within practice to be effective, it is essential that they have a shared language representing commonly held values, knowledge, terminology and procedures to frame and explore practice problems.

The second key feature of action science is *building theories in practice*—i.e., practitioners make their tacit theories explicit in order to subject them to critical examination. Thus, in the ideal dialogue/research intersection, practitioners individually and collectively “construct and test theories in practice by inquiring into actors’ behaviors and the reasoning behind it [them?]” (Friedman, 2001, p. 161).

The third key feature of action science involves *combining interpretation with rigorous testing*. In other words, a collaborative dialogue in which there is an open exchange of ideas and feelings among colleagues is only a part of the inquiry. The collective pool of constructed meaning must then be tested, revisited and revised in light of the outcomes.

Finally, action science is viewed as a means of *creating alternatives to the status quo*, a social process in which a given group of inquirers confront stuck places in a system (whether it is on the level of an individual coaching practice or the field as a whole) and formulate and test processes for creating change.

Challenges for Coaching Practitioners, Scholars, and Educators

In order to use the principles and processes of dialogue in the service of coaching-

related research and to engage as a community of practitioner-scholars, we need to consider some specific challenges. These are based on the interpretation of the Symposium experience and related literature and are derived from the dialogue among the authors.

1. *Creating and maintaining diverse forums for collaborative inquiry.* The ICF Research Symposia have opened up opportunities for such conversations by bringing together diverse constituents within the coaching community and introducing research to coach practitioners. One observation from the preceding years' symposia is the broad spectrum of inquiry skills, academic interests and disciplines and cognitive orientations of participants. The Symposium format, like the field of coaching itself, has borrowed heavily from academic and scholarly gatherings in other fields. As a result, the symposia have perhaps been most effective in generating and supporting community and dialogue between and among scholars and scholar-practitioners. The growth of membership in the ICF Research Special Interest Group (SIG), for example, suggests that participants of prior symposia have been moved to continue working together as a scholarly community. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the symposia have been equally effective in engaging practitioners in well-formed, practice-based inquiry. Thus, the coaching community may consider forming and sustaining a variety of forums for collaborative inquiry. We propose that such spaces be safe, supportive and sufficiently neutral as to truly encourage the presentation and testing of various hypotheses about coaching and coaching practices. Such spaces should also provide the necessary support and structure to bring together interpretation and rigorous inquiry.

2. *Identifying the interested participants.* In a panel of coaches, educators/trainers, and research at the 2004 Symposium, John Bennett proposed a three-level model of participants in the conversation related to the practice, education, and research related to coaching. The proposed model may be viewed as a triangle with the largest level at the base being comprised of practitioners. The middle group might be referred to as scholar-practitioners—those who are engaged in the practice of coaching as well as the conversation about theory, theory testing, and research. The third part of the triangle which might comprise the smallest portion may be those almost exclusively focused on the development of a field of coaching—the scholars, academic, researchers (Page and Stein, 2005). We propose the identification of such potentially interested participants not for the sake of separating them, but for the purpose of bring them together to share ideas, issues, problems, practices, and solutions.

3. *Creating a common language.* Critical to effective collaborative learning communities is a common language representing shared values, knowledge, technology and procedures (Friedman, 2001). In other fields such as psychology, engineering, education and social work, a common language is an integral part of the education process. At present, coaches come to this practice with an extraordinary variety of backgrounds and professional trainings, which color our way of seeing and understanding each other. Even a simple term like “partner” evokes very different connotations and denotations for a coach trained as an educator, one trained as a

psychotherapist and one trained as an attorney. Thus, research terms such as “evidence” may be easily misplaced or interpreted in such a variety of ways as to hold little shared meaning. This diversity of viewpoints and perspectives is a rich resource for the purposeful construction of a shared language, which reflects and integrates our collective wisdom about both the principles and practices of coaching-related research. We can look to other fields such as psychotherapy and take to heart the lessons learned from efforts such as the Boulder Conference (Campane, 2004). The beginning stages of the field seem to be the most appropriate time to begin knitting together the disparate threads emerging from various coaching schools, theories and organizations into a whole garment. It will require collaboration between and among key organizations in the field to do so.

4. *Creating a paradigm for professional practice.* Based on collective inquiry, a unique paradigm for the coaching profession can be promoted, recognizing that rigorous inquiry can take many forms and that responsibility for such inquiry rests with both scholars and practitioners. We have learned from previous ICF Research Symposia that practitioners’ interests in research span a broad spectrum from the most instrumental (i.e., wanting data to incorporate into marketing and business plans) into the realm of life-long learning and professional development. We suggest that all professional organizations in the coaching field strongly endorse the principle and practice of practitioner inquiry. We further propose that all coach training and education programs ensure that coaches have the basic tools of scientific inquiry in order to do so.

Conclusion

As authors we approached this work as a collaborative process, a dialogue of sorts, designed to reflect on our individual experiences at the 2005 Symposium, the sharing that was done during that day, and for two of us (Francine and John) the work we did as members of the Symposium Organizing Team. Then, through sharing with each other, a dialogue occurred that enabled us to find our own and collective meaning in the experience and to generate ideas for further consideration. We offer our interpretation and understanding as an invitation for others to continue the dialogue, participate with others, share ideas, and to ask questions. We further invite you to consider this work as a continuation of an important dialogue in the emerging field of coaching.

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