

Discovering, applying and integrating: The process of learning in coaching

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Abstract

Coaching is a rapidly expanding field with interdisciplinary roots and broad application. However, despite abundant prescriptive literature, research into the process of coaching is minimal. Similarly, although learning is inherently recognised in the process of coaching, the process of learning in coaching is little understood and learning theory makes up only a small part of the evidence-based coaching literature. In this report of a grounded theory study of coaches and their clients, the process of learning in coaching across a range of coaching models is examined and discussed. The findings demonstrate how learning in coaching emerged as a process of discovering, applying and integrating new knowledge, which culminated in a process of developing. This process occurred through eight key coaching processes shared between coaches and clients and combined a multitude of learning theories.

Keywords: coaching, learning, coaching process, learning theory

Introduction

The process of learning in coaching from the perspectives of coaches and clients across a range of coaching models is examined in this paper. Coaching may be defined as a goal-directed, multi-faceted process for enhancing people, work and life and, as an industry, it has, and is still, experiencing rapid growth (Brock, 2006). However, due to the limited size of the body of research and evidence base, coaching still rests on weak foundations. Although the literature suggests “learning is at the heart of coaching” (Skiffington & Zeus, 2003, p.30), and it seems to be implicitly understood that in order to achieve coaching outcomes learning must occur, there remains little understanding of the process of learning in coaching.

Because of the rapid and exponential growth in the field of coaching over the last decade (Brock, 2006) and lack of a current evidence base, considerable confusion still surrounds the understanding of what coaching is, where it comes from and what it does. Executive coaching is by far the most dominant form of coaching in the marketplace and in current research, with different forms continually emerging (Grant, 2003; Skiffington & Zeus, 2003). The field of life coaching, also known as personal coaching, displays similar degrees of variation (Creane, 2002), with many

coach training schools having developed, published and propagated their own models (Coach U, 2005; Hudson, 1999; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998).

Despite the diversity of coaching, it appears that several commonalities underpin most forms of coaching. First, there is a common goal-directed, solution-focused framework used in coaching (Bono, Purvanova, & Towler, 2004; Grant, 2006; Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006). In addition, process coaching is another common approach (Bono, et al., 2004), wherein a number of accepted processes are seen to underpin coaching (Bono, et al., 2004; Evered, 1989; Gale, Liljenstrand, Pardieu, & Nebeker, 2002). Furthermore, although outcomes can be varied (International Coach Federation, 1998), a range of qualitative and quantitative studies appear to demonstrate universal outcomes of coaching, regardless of the form of coaching being applied (Grant, 2003; Paige, 2002). Despite confusion surrounding the understanding of what coaching is and its many forms, a definition of coaching may therefore be drawn from the literature as follows:

Coaching is a goal-directed, multi-faceted process for enhancing people, work and life.

What is learning and why does it matter to coaching?

The literature on learning is as abundant as coaching literature is sparse. Learning may be viewed from the perspectives of various philosophical disciplines and schools of thought, and each has its own definition of what learning is and how it should be facilitated. Despite this, educational dictionaries (Lawton & Gordon, 1996; Rowntree, 1981) appear to agree that:

Learning occurs through experience and results in a permanent or lasting change in knowledge, skill or attitude.

Learning is inherently recognised in the process of coaching in both the prescriptive and the evidence-based literature. In fact, foundational prescriptive texts consistently identify the role of learning in the coaching process (Whitmore, 2002; Whitworth, et al., 1998) and the International Coach Federation (ICF) proposed the facilitation of “learning and results” (International Coach Federation, 1999, p. 4) as one of four major coaching processes. Furthermore, coaching has been described as a “forum for learning” (Creane, 2002, p. iv), a “personal education pathway” (Duff, 2002, p. 7), “a vehicle and a platform for learning” (Zeus & Skiffington, 2002, p. 20) and “a model for effective learning” (Griffiths, 2005, p. 55). Thus, as Skiffington and Zeus (2003) suggested, it appears that “learning is at the heart of coaching” (p. 30), and it seems to be implicitly understood that in order to achieve coaching outcomes, learning must occur. Yet, despite wide recognition of the inherent significance of learning in coaching, there appears to be little research which explicitly examines the learning process in coaching and only minimal literature which currently draws links between coaching and specific learning theory.

Those links which have been made to date highlight the relevance of adult learning (Cox, 2006; Grant, 2005), experiential learning (Hurd, 2002), transformative learning (Clifford-Rapp, 2005; Cox, 2006) lifelong learning (Guest, 2006;), as well as mentoring theory (Brockbank & McGill, 2006) and self-directed learning (Wilkins, 2004). However, to date, the utilization of the

full breadth of learning theory to strengthen the evidence-based foundation of coaching, especially outside the realms of adult learning, remains largely untapped.

In light of the gaps in knowledge relating to learning in coaching, the following research questions underpin the study reported in this paper:

- How does learning occur in coaching?
- How do coaches facilitate learning?
- How do clients experience learning?
- What is the significance of learning in coaching?

Methodology

Grounded theory

Grounded theory was the methodology applied in this study of the learning processes underpinning coaching. Grounded theory is a form of qualitative research, yet both its conception and development were heavily influenced by the quantitative paradigm. As such, grounded theory integrates both inductive and deductive research and orchestrates a unique interplay between qualitative and quantitative techniques. These techniques facilitate the development of a set of theoretical propositions that explain the phenomena under investigation and serve to generate new theory. In this way, not only does grounded theory meet the demands of the emerging body of coaching research, but it also supports the fulfilment of the research aim of explaining how learning occurs in coaching.

This study utilises an integrative grounded theory design which is predominantly emergent, with constructivist roots and systematic overtones. Glaser's (1992) notion of theory emerging from the data itself has been borne in mind at all stages in the study. In addition, this study integrated systematic procedures suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as an overall framework for investigation, as well as acknowledgement of the constructivist nature of grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2003).

Data Collection

A total of four International Coach Federation (ICF) Master Certified Coaches (MCC) and one Professional Certified Coach (PCC) plus nine of their respective past and current clients participated in this grounded theory study. A combination of purposeful, maximal variation and theoretical sampling was used progressively, in this order, to recruit respondents to the study. First coach training schools were identified and approached, based on the uniqueness and proliferation of their coaching methodology. Secondly, coaches were approached and selected and finally clients of the selected coaches. Interviews were adopted as the major means of data collection, but in addition, document collection provided some supplementary data. Finally, consistent with grounded theory methodology, the literature was also used as an additional form of data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in grounded theory is an ongoing process which begins from the very first interview and continues until the final writing of the research paper (Kvale, 1996). The process of data analysis adopted in this study is a combination of the approaches outlined by Glaser (1992), Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2003). It utilises constant comparative method for “conceptual power” (Glaser, 1992, p. 41), within the broad frameworks governed by open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with an appreciation of the mutual creation of knowledge by the researcher and the respondents themselves (Charmaz, 2003).

Coding and categorisation form the foundations of data analysis. In this study, codes evolved as categories were uncovered. They subsequently provided pivot points from which the data and categories were related and interrelated to ultimately form a whole. Thus, by means of the codes, emerging hypotheses were validated and tested, as comparisons were drawn and reliability checked (Kvale, 1996). Strauss and Corbin (1998) promoted a three-step systematic procedure of coding and analysis, through which information is assembled in a theoretical paradigm by means of processes which expand, interrelate and refine categories. These were the methods employed in this study.

Due to the integrative grounded theory approach adopted within this study, open, axial and selective coding, were implemented as *ways of seeing* and were executed in unison with each other. This sustained the philosophy of emergence, as theory was generated. In this study, extensive manual note-taking, in addition to the use of a computer software package called Nvivo, were used to collect and analyse data more effectively throughout the development of the proposed theory and also to support the reporting of the findings.

Findings

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, and in order to clarify, validate and extend findings (Hunter, Hari, Egbu, & Kelly, 2005), the learning-centred theory of coaching explained in this paper is integrated with a discussion of the literature. While this approach is not intended to provide comprehensive validation or an explanation of every phenomenon which emerged in this study, it does aim to demonstrate “scholarliness” and “illustrate where current literature is incorrect, is overly simplistic or partially explains a phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 52). Thus, it purposefully focuses on identifying gaps and potential inaccuracies in the coaching literature and attempts to reconcile these by illustrating the links between the coaching process and learning theory.

Because of the nature of grounded theory and the intricacy of the process of coaching, it was not possible to answer each research question directly. This paper presents the major findings only. Due to the limitations in length of a paper of this kind, unlike most grounded theory studies, the presentation of these findings includes only minimal amounts of respondent data within discussion of the core category.

Discovering

The process of discovering new knowledge in coaching emerged as an iterative cycle which combined four key coaching processes of relating, questioning, reflecting and listening. Firstly, an accepting, honest, trusting, equal, purposeful and attraction-based relationship between coaches and clients formed a foundation for and *supported* the process of discovering new knowledge. Secondly, questioning *drove* the process of discovering new knowledge, as coaches used questions to explore, challenge and extend clients' new knowledge and trigger the process of clients reflecting. Importantly, it was *within* the process of reflecting that clients first discovered new knowledge, and finally, coaches listened to clients' reflections, within which process clients' discoveries and new knowledge were identified and *noticed*. This, then, formed an iterative cycle as emergent new knowledge formed the basis for further discovery of new knowledge through the same processes. In this way, learning was further encouraged, deepened, extended and reinforced through relating, questioning, reflecting and listening. This iterative cycle of discovering new knowledge is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

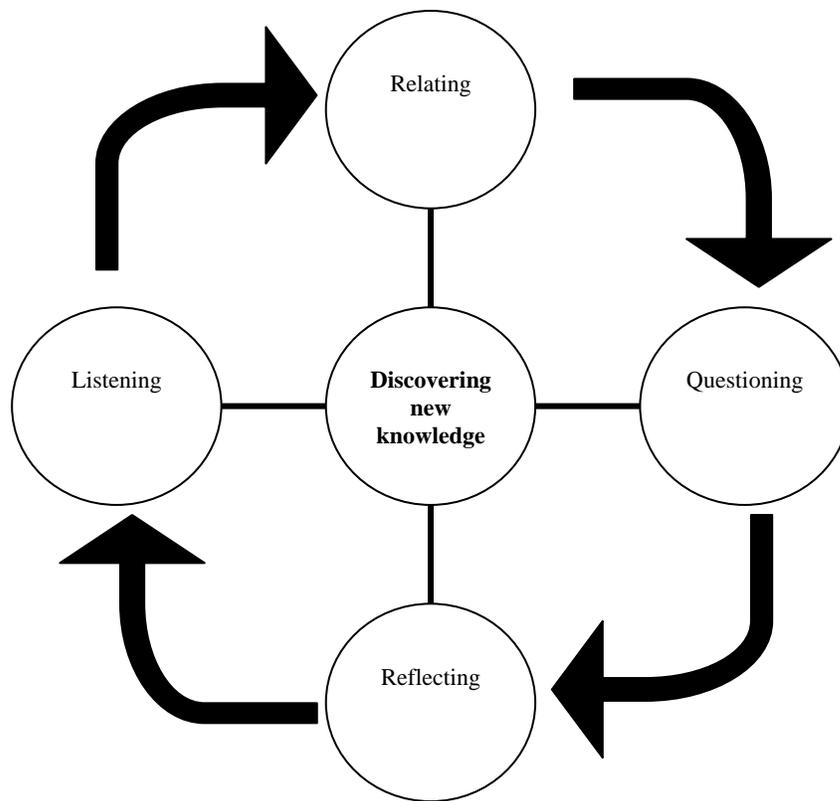


Figure 1: The process of discovering new knowledge in coaching

When clients discovered new knowledge through the combined processes of relating, questioning, reflecting and listening, they then applied it.

Applying

The process of applying new knowledge emerged as a process which extended, consolidated and deepened learning through holding clients accountable and by clients taking action. By fostering commitment, clients were held accountable to learning, to their newly discovered knowledge and, with that, to themselves, to taking action and to making progress. This resulted in the process of taking action, whereby various forms of action were designed to stimulate reflection, implement new knowledge and learning and progress clients toward their desires. In addition, the two processes (of holding clients accountable and taking action) were largely facilitated through questioning. Applying new knowledge was further intertwined with the processes of discovering new knowledge, as the action clients took, in turn, fuelled further discovery of new knowledge by providing stimulus for questioning, reflecting and listening. The process of applying new knowledge and its relationship to discovering new knowledge are illustrated in Figure 2 below:

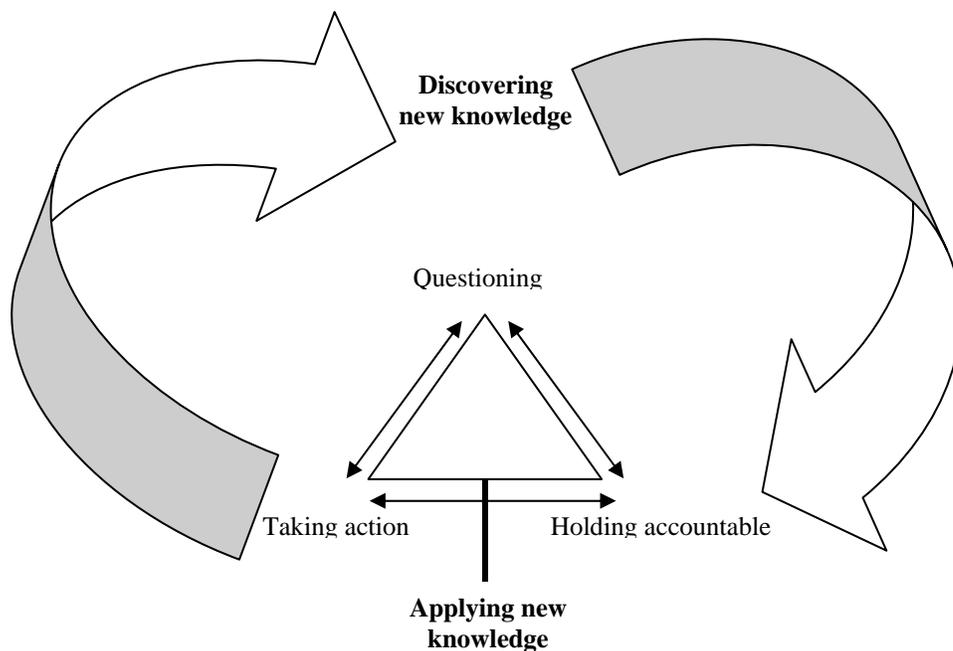


Figure 2: The process of applying new knowledge and its relationship to discovering new knowledge in coaching

When clients applied new knowledge through the combined processes of being held accountable and taking action, they then integrated it.

Integrating

Integrating new knowledge emerged as a process by which clients embodied the new knowledge and learning that they discovered and applied during coaching. The process involved coaches making meaning through listening, coaches holding clients accountable to aligning different dimensions of knowledge, clients taking action which immediately integrated into their lives, as well as taking responsibility and self-coaching. By taking responsibility, clients owned the new knowledge, made choices based on the emergent knowledge and used this knowledge to set themselves free, resulting in enhanced confidence. The process of integrating new knowledge was then extended, as clients integrated the coaching processes of relating, reflecting and listening to themselves and holding themselves accountable. Clients' facilitation of these processes independently, resulted in an iterative cycle of discovering, applying and integrating new knowledge, even in the absence of a coach. The process of integrating new knowledge and its relationship to discovering and applying new knowledge is illustrated in Figure 3 below:

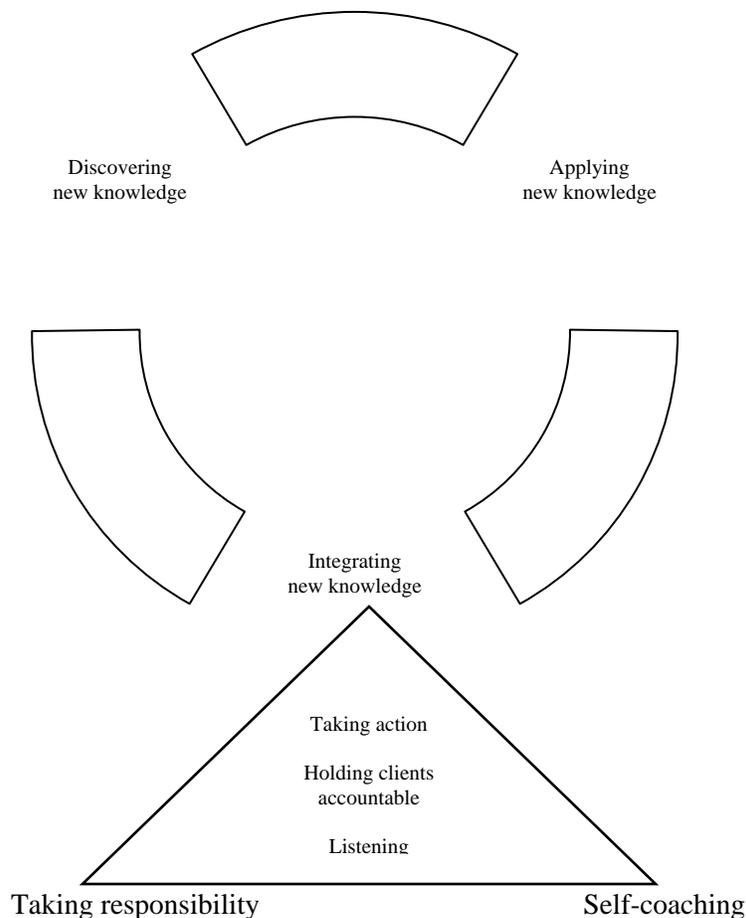


Figure 3: The process of integrating new knowledge and its relationship to discovering and applying new knowledge

The process of integrating new knowledge simultaneously stemmed from and served to sustain the processes of discovering and applying new knowledge culminating in a process of developing.

Developing

Within this study, the three-way learning process of discovering, applying and integrating emerged within the coaching process, and culminated as a process of developing. Learning in coaching was predominantly facilitated through complementary coach-client processes:

- Coaches fostered an accepting, honest, trusting, equal, purposeful and attraction-based relationship
- Coaches questioned clients
- Clients reflected
- Coaches listened to clients' reflections
- Coaches held clients accountable to learning
- Clients took action
- Clients took responsibility

Clients had a strong tendency to emphasise that during coaching, learning was more like a process of discovery or, in some cases, rediscovery:

I think part of coaching or developing is all about re-finding... (Coach 4)

Sometimes, it seems like a bit of a revisiting or a reinforcing of things ... that I thought I was aware of, but I actually wasn't. (Client 2)

This rediscovery occurred predominantly through the key coaching processes of clients relating to coaches, coaches questioning clients, clients reflecting and coaches listening to clients. Learning through discovering or re-discovering reflected the nature of inductive and especially discovery learning, in which people use their existing resources to discover what they need to know to find their own solutions to a challenge (Prince & Felder, 2007). Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that inductive and especially discovery learning theory may have the potential to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the process of learning in coaching.

In many cases in the study, respondents indicated that although clients had acquired particular knowledge many years ago, it was not until they applied this knowledge in their lives through coaching that they felt they had really learnt:

Well, learning for me is not having some new ideas in my head. Learning for me is using it in my life... (Coach 2)

If you're stuck doing the same thing that you've always done, then you're not learning. You may know the knowledge, but you're not implementing the knowledge. (Coach 5)

I think it's [learning is] tapping into past experiences and knowledge and applying it ... through that, practical application. (Client 2)

Thus, for respondents in this study, learning in coaching involved not just discovering or re-discovering new knowledge, but also applying it in their lives. This form of applied learning is, in turn, reflected in coaching literature, as coaching is recognised as an effective tool for the transfer of training (Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997; Wang & Wentling, 2001). Furthermore, application is an important component of experiential learning which involves, among other things, concrete experience and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Therefore, this study provides some empirical evidence of the significance of experiential learning in the process of learning in coaching.

However, many respondents still did not consider that learning had taken place simply as a result of discovering/rediscovers and applying new knowledge. A further component of learning in coaching emerged in which clients integrated new knowledge into their lives and sense of self:

What we learn becomes part of who we are. (Coach 4)

...true learning is not what you read or hear about, it's what you integrate... it's all about application and integration. (Client 6)

The coaching that I've had thus far, I feel, has automatically integrated into me. (Client 8)

This integrative learning process occurred as clients related to themselves, as coaches listened to clients, held them accountable, as clients took action, and most obviously, as clients took responsibility and began to self-coach. Furthermore, respondents commented how clients could *never go back* because this learning had become part of who they were. Thus, through the process of learning in coaching, clients discovered/rediscovers new knowledge, applied it to their lives and integrated it into their sense of self and being:

The more one learns something, the more they absorb, and it becomes part of who they are. (Client 5)

These findings are widely supported in the literature. As part of the process of becoming self-aware, Goswami (1993) referred to "integration of information about the self" (p. 202). Thus, the common outcome of coaching relating to enhanced self-awareness appears to be facilitated through a process of discovering, applying and integrating new knowledge into one's sense of self. Furthermore, Grant's (2006) integrated goal-focused approach to executive coaching identifies an "integrated sense of self" (p. 164) to be at the core of the theory, highlighting the importance of self-congruency. Thus, coaching literature appears to already reflect the phenomenon of integration as it emerged in this study. In addition, deep learning involves discovery of meaning and emphasises the active integration of new information with past and present knowledge and experience (Arnau, 2003). From the data coaching appears to provide a means of facilitating deep learning.

Similarly, the process of integration, together with discovery and application, are also linked to a more recent move toward powerful learning environments (De Corte, Verschaffel, Entwistle, & van Merriënboer, 2003; Könings, Brand-Gruwel, & van Merriënboer, 2005). Results from this study therefore suggest that coaching appears to facilitate deep *and* powerful learning. Furthermore, Mezirow's (2000) last stage of transformative learning depicts "a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective" (p. 22). Thus, this study suggests that the process of learning in coaching is one of deep, powerful *and* transformative learning.

The process of discovering, applying and integrating new knowledge described in this study is also reflected in common definitions of learning. The definition of learning highlighted earlier in the literature review explained that *Learning occurs through experience and results in a permanent or lasting change in knowledge, skill or attitude*. Each element of this definition was reflected in the findings of this study as clients' experiences were harnessed to expand their knowledge, and clients felt they could *never go back* after this process. As a result of this experience, through the discovery, application and integration of new knowledge, learning in coaching emerged as lasting:

The kinds of changes that I've made in my life that are really lasting ... It [coaching] left me being able to create that on my own after the coaching ended. (Client 7)

It's the discovery in that experience that really makes a huge impact. It's so profound that I don't think that I could slip back. (Client 8)

In addition, the discovery, application and integration of new knowledge appeared to culminate in accelerated learning:

Mostly, I think people would do what they end up doing in coaching, just not as quickly or ... as easily ... I think coaching enables people to make the changes they would normally make in their lives, but it's more effortless, it's easier and it tends to happen faster... (Coach 3)

It's [the coaching is] starting from a very tiny small spot and growing, you know, very, very, very slowly in the beginning to a much faster and bigger growth rate as this time. (Client 8)

The emergence of accelerated learning is better understood in the light of accelerated learning theory (Rose & Nicholl, 1998). Like the process of learning in coaching as explained in this study, accelerated learning environments involve a holistic approach to learning. This especially involves intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence, varied modes of learning, collaborative learning, positive and trusting relationships, applied learning in practice contexts and using experience, reflection and adult learning theories of building on learning, using learners' day-to-day worlds and adult identity theories (Boyd, 2004). Thus, the findings of this study suggest that the coaching process appears to involve the facilitation of accelerating learning.

Summary

The process of discovering, applying and integrating new knowledge formed an iterative learning cycle, which was continually built upon, deepened and extended, and which culminated as a process of developing. This broad process of learning in coaching is summarised in Figure 4 below:

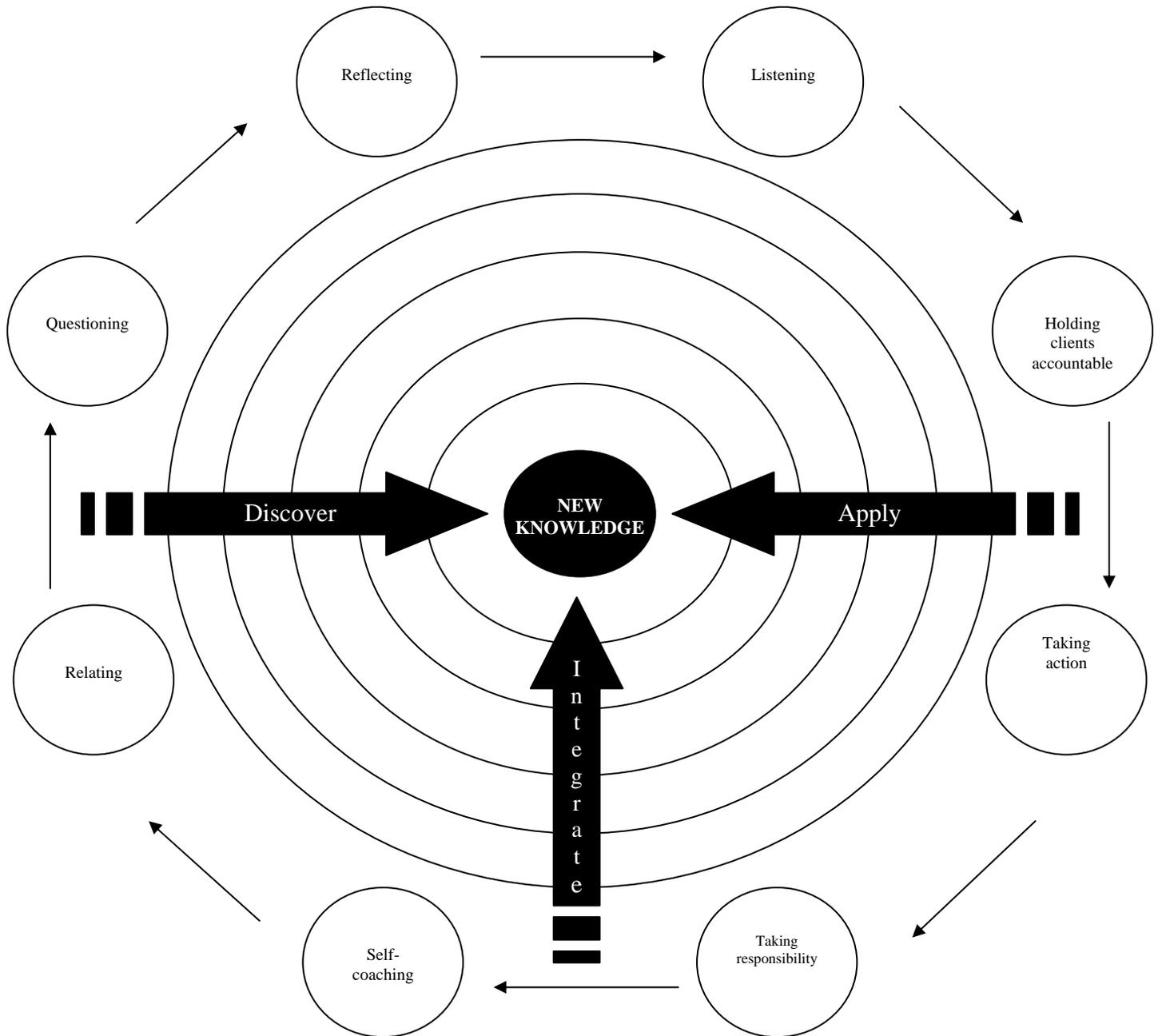


Figure 4: The process of learning in coaching

The process of learning in coaching through the discovery, application and integration of new knowledge and the holistic process of developing, in fact, incorporates many distinct learning theories. This paper alone has highlighted how the learning process in coaching involve characteristics of collaborative learning, mentoring, self-directed learning, social learning, reflective learning, adult learning, experiential learning, transformative learning, deep learning, authentic learning, action learning, inductive learning, discovery learning, powerful learning, lifelong learning and accelerated learning.

This suggests not only that learning is interwoven throughout the process of coaching, but that coaching provides a means of facilitating a dynamic interchange between multiple learning theories. As learning is inherently viewed as a means by which coaching outcomes are achieved, coaching practice may be improved as coaches gain a deeper understanding of the learning theories underpinning coaching. Thus, as Law (2007) argued:

[While coaching offers] an opportunity for learning, the outcome cannot be guaranteed as given, and, for learning to take place, coaches ... must actively engage in the learning process during the coaching ... journey. (p. 49)

Limitations

There are several limitations associated with this study that relate to the study methods and study respondents. Firstly, there was an absence of observational data. As the study developed, it became clear how observation could have served as a source of data that may have been used to ensure reliability of findings. There is an opportunity for future research to capitalise on the abundance of recorded coaching sessions used for the purposes of coach certification and mentoring practices to validate findings of studies such as this and inform future coaching research. In addition, only ICF certified coaches were used in this study. As such, the findings of this study may only reveal the processes of ICF aligned coaches and may not fit coaches who do not align with the ICF. Therefore, another avenue for future research may be an examination of the same or similar processes among non-ICF coaches. Finally, as the purpose of grounded theory is to generate theory, the findings of this study remain largely unverified and inherent within them is an opportunity for future research to test the validity of the reported hypotheses.

Conclusion

Coaching is a rapidly expanding field with interdisciplinary roots and broad applications. However, despite abundant prescriptive literature, research into the process of coaching is minimal. Similarly, although learning is inherently recognised in the process of coaching, the process of learning in coaching has been little understood, and learning theory has made up only a small part of the evidence-based coaching literature.

This grounded theory study was aimed at generating new theory to explain the process of learning in coaching and learning was recognised by respondents as a major process. It occurred through a process of development as clients discovered, applied and integrated new knowledge. Within this process, coaches fostered an accepting, honest, trusting, equal and purposeful relationship with clients, questioned and listened to them and held them accountable to learning, while clients reflected, took action, took responsibility and progressed to self-coaching, gradually taking over the processes that were initially facilitated by coaches. Finally, the findings of this study demonstrated how this process utilised and combined an array of learning theories, which ultimately served to deepen and accelerate learning.

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