

Researcher as Goldilocks: searching for a methodology that is ‘just right’ for a coaching and mentoring study

Colleen Harding, Bournemouth University, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB
Email contact: charding@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore some of the tensions and possibilities for those engaging in coaching and mentoring research, maybe for the first time. The paper highlights the importance of good research into coaching and mentoring and then goes on to consider some of the epistemological options available to the researcher. Following the introduction of a specific coaching and mentoring study the paper explores some of the tensions for the researcher in the research process, before considering three methodological approaches and their appropriateness for answering the research question.

Keywords: coaching, mentoring, research, methodology

Introduction

The growing interest in the theory and practice of coaching and mentoring has brought with it an increased call for good quality research into coaching and mentoring. One of the challenges for the serious researcher is to find an appropriate methodology to answer the research question and this paper aims to set out some of the methodological conundrums facing both the academic and the practitioner undertaking research into coaching and mentoring.

The paper is divided into two parts. The former is largely theoretical with a focus on the call for research and some of the epistemological options available to the researcher searching for good quality evidence. The second takes a more pragmatic approach. The author will introduce a research study with a specific focus on coaching and mentoring and will explore some of the practical challenges confronting the researcher, including the way in which the researcher is conceptualised in the research process. The author will then take the reader on a ‘metaphorical journey’ to consider three potential methodologies, with the aim of discovering a methodology that will be ‘just right’ for the coaching and mentoring study.

The call for good research into coaching and mentoring

In recent years there have been calls for more effective research into coaching and mentoring. As coaching matures into a profession and the expectations of potential clients have increased, Kauffman and Bachkirova (2008a) highlight the need for those involved in coaching to be aware of coaching research and good practice and to

develop the ways in which they articulate what they are offering, grounded in the theoretical and empirical bases of their coaching practice.

However, empirical research into coaching is still in its infancy and historically the evidence base for the effectiveness of coaching has been anecdotal, far from rigorous and has been either methodologically flawed, or limited in the defence of the methodologies that have been used (Clutterbuck, 2008; Grant and Cavanagh, 2004). Nevertheless, the knowledge base of coach-specific research that details theories, techniques and outcomes of coaching is growing annually (Grant & Zackon, 2004) and there is a growing body of empirical evidence for research into executive and development coaching (Clutterbuck, 2008).

Although mentoring theory, practice and research are also maturing, Hezlett and Gibson (2005) point to the lack of mentoring articles in the human resources development literature and have outlined a research agenda to fill some of the gaps in the mentoring literature that is relevant to human resources and development; this agenda includes building on research into individual and organisational benefits, as well as research into processes and relationships, with the goal of more effectively informing the practice of mentoring in organisations. Clutterbuck (2008) highlights the dominance of US based quantitative studies of mentoring suggesting that they have been flawed and use a model of mentoring that is not shared in all cultures, although he does suggest that studies are once again in evidence that explore developmental mentoring through a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Along with the recognition of the need for good research to support the development of coaching and mentoring practice, there are suggestions of who would be well placed to undertake the research. Passmore and Gibbs (2007) suggest that coaching psychologists may have a real contribution to make to research in the coaching profession, building on their experience of undertaking high quality, psychological research. However, research does not need to be purely the domain of the coaching psychologist: Fillery-Travis and Lane (2008) challenge both academic and practitioner researchers to learn and work together to develop good practice for the coaching profession.

Methodological options for coaching and mentoring research

The challenge for the serious researcher is to find an appropriate methodology to answer the research question. There are a number of methodological approaches available to the researcher and it is worth taking time to explore some of the philosophies and theoretical perspectives that underpin the approach to a research study. Crotty (1998) highlights that the starting point for a research study is not in choosing the methods for data collection, but in the epistemological position of the researcher as he or she seeks to identify what kinds of knowledge are legitimate and adequate for answering the research question. This position influences the theoretical perspective and therefore the methodology, which in turn influences the choice of methods (Gray, 2004).

The researcher may begin with a preference for representing a more objective reality and therefore may be more inclined to take a positivist approach, choosing a methodology that will generate quantitative data, to potentially give the study 'an aura of scientific respectability' (Denscombe, 2003, p.236). This type of researcher believes that measurement is fundamental to scientific activity (Coolican, 2004) and builds on the advantages of analytical techniques based on mathematics, probability and statistical tests of significance that can give the interpreted data additional credibility.

An alternative starting point for the researcher might be in the more socially constructed nature of reality where truth and meaning are created by the interaction of the research participants with the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and in which the participants create their own meanings in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomena (Gray, 2004, p.17). This would involve a more qualitative approach leading to a study that is the product of a process that involves the interpretation of data in which the researcher's own identity, values and beliefs cannot be entirely eliminated from the process (Denscombe, 2003, p. 268). Much of the existing research into coaching is of the qualitative type, often involving small scale research and case studies (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004) and a phenomenological approach has also been identified as being of value in mentoring research (Gibson, 2004).

The researcher may select a more pragmatic paradigm and decide on a mixed methods approach to the study, driven more by the demands of the research question rather than the philosophical arguments, and aim to combine both qualitative and quantitative methods into a distinct research design or methodology. This approach has grown more during the last decade and has been gaining acceptance in the social sciences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

Coaching as a field of knowledge has often drawn from different disciplines such as management, education, social sciences, philosophy and psychology, which in turn are representative of a range of starting points and assumptions (Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2008b). As such there is no easy answer for the researcher when making decisions on the best way to construct their study. Grant and Cavanagh (2004) have called for an increase in more systematic and rigorous research into coaching with more large scale, methodologically rigorous, controlled outcome studies with an increased focus on objective quantitative outcome measures, such as the study by Grant and Zackon (2004). However, Drake (2008, p.23) encourages the researcher to look beyond evidence that is 'universal, static, objective and neutral' to evidence that is 'contextual, dynamic, subjective, political and socially constructed'.

Whichever approach the researcher decides to take, Stober et al (2006) encourage coaching professionals to make connections between coaching, research and evidence in a way that has scientific integrity and practical utility and Kauffman and Bachkirova (2008a) and Drake (2008, 2009) remind researchers that their primary aim is to gather evidence that will help in understanding what is happening in the coaching process, with the ultimate goal of improving practice

Once researchers have worked through the issues relating to their philosophical perspectives they need to make some practical decisions about how they are going to answer their research question. This paper now moves to outline the current doctoral research study into coaching and mentoring that is being undertaken by the author of this paper as she seeks to find an appropriate methodology for answering the research question.

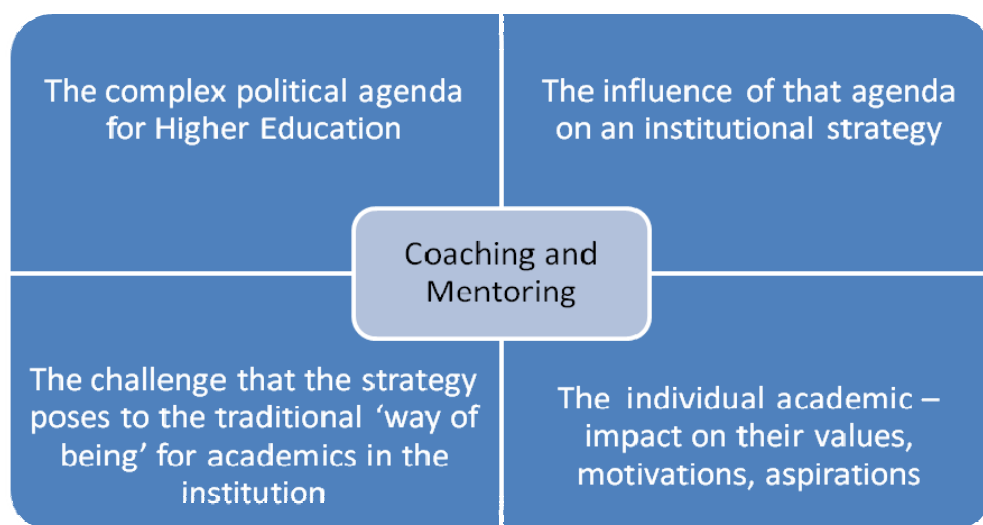
Introduction to the study

The context of the study and the chosen epistemological approach will be introduced briefly. There will then follow an outline of some of the tensions for the researcher within the study. Three methodological options for the research study will be considered for their suitability for the study, both in terms of minimising the tensions for the researcher and for their potential for answering the research question.

The study seeks to answer the research question: *'How are coaching and mentoring being used to support the alignment of academic staff and institutional strategy during a period of significant organisational change?'*

The study is taking place in a university in the South of England that has responded to the complex political agenda for Higher Education by developing a new strategy that has challenged the traditional 'way of being' for academics in that institution and which, in turn, has impacted on the values, motivations and aspirations of academics at an individual level. The study aims to discover the ways in which coaching and mentoring are supporting academic staff to align with the institution's new strategy (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: The context for the study



The research aims to achieve a greater understanding of individual perspectives within an organisational context and the study has the potential to touch on the types

of tensions, dilemmas and possibilities for research into emotion in organisations described by Fineman (2005) who makes a case for the superiority of interpretive approaches in representing the qualitative texture of emotion and its political contextualisation. The researcher has taken up the challenge set out by Drake (2008, p.23) to design a study that will facilitate the collection of data that is 'contextual, dynamic, subjective, political and socially constructed'. The study is therefore being conducted under the epistemological perspective of constructivism in order that those involved in the study will be able to create their own meaning from their experiences. The researcher has considered three methodological approaches traditionally linked with the interpretivist paradigm with the intention of using mainly qualitative methods.

Once satisfied with the chosen epistemological underpinning for the study, the researcher then needs to give consideration to the ways in which she is conceptualised in the research process. Qualitative research has sometimes been described as problematic because, in practice, there is a tension between the search for validity and truth and the personal engagement of the researcher. The experience and identity of the researcher inevitably influence the design of the study and the findings (McLeod, 2007). It is important therefore for a researcher to select a methodology that acknowledges the likely impact of the researcher on the study, as well as one that has the potential to answer the research question.

The researcher in the research study

In order to counter the charges of bias levelled at qualitative research, researchers are often encouraged to reflect on and articulate issues of reflexivity to help the research audience to understand the researcher and the work that is being presented to them (Wellington et al, 2005).

The need for this researcher to acknowledge and articulate the reflexive issues around the study are more pronounced in that she is what could be described as an 'insider-researcher'. As an employee of the institution in which the study is taking place, the researcher's 'pre-understanding' of the institution both theoretically and as a lived experience means that she is familiar with the history, the culture and many of the people who work there. Her experience of working in the institution for ten years will mean that she will appreciate the significance of critical events that may occur during the course of the study. The relationships that they have built up should enable her to act freely without attracting attention or suspicion. Conversely the disadvantage of her role as an insider-researcher is the risk of the ways in which her own preconceived ideas and underlying personal bias may influence the study. As the research is so immersed in the life and culture of the institution there is also a risk that she may miss what Silverman (2007, p. 18) describes as 'being able to locate the mundane features of extraordinary situations and to identify what is remarkable in everyday life'. Neither does she want to compromise her own position, and the relationships that she has built up over a number of years, through the ways in which she conducts the research. The dual roles of organisational member and researcher can cause conflict and there will be a need to balance the justification for the

organisational requirements for the study with the researcher's own justification for the activities involved in the study (Coghlan, 2001).

BERA (2009) and Bridges (2001) highlight a continuum from insider-researcher to outsider-researcher and it could be argued that this researcher could also be described as an 'outsider-researcher'. The researcher holds a unique position in the organisation because her role as Staff Development Manager is balanced between supporting the implementation of the institutional strategy and being grounded in an appreciation of what it is like in the real world for staff working in the institution. Whilst the institution's senior managers have certain expectations of academic staff, academic staff may have their own motivations for working at the institution. The researcher's functional job role within the institution is to provide a business-focused individually-centred approach to developing staff and involves providing appropriate staff development solutions to support the academic staff in achieving the institution's strategy. As an employee of the institution the researcher is potentially what could be described as an insider-researcher. However, as the researcher is a member of the University's 'professional' staff and therefore an employee that is on a contract different from those who are the subject of the study (senior managers, professors and academics) the researcher could be perceived as an 'outsider-researcher'. The risks associated with being an outsider-researcher include the potential for creating damaging frameworks of understanding as the outsider 'represents' the views of the participants and this can potentially lead to a feeling of disempowerment for the participants in the research (Bridges, 2001).

These tensions increase the challenge in choosing a methodology that is 'just right' for the study. The paper now moves on to explore just three of the methodological approaches traditionally linked to the interpretive paradigm that could be suitable for this coaching and mentoring study: action research, grounded theory and case study.

An exploration of three methodological approaches

During the process of exploring the three methodological approaches (Action Research, Grounded Theory and Case Study), the researcher identified with the story of Goldilocks, first recognising the options that were metaphorically too hot, cold, big, hard and soft before identifying the ways in which the methodologies could be 'just right' for the research study.

Action Research

Action research has been described as a collaborative research process that follows the cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that can lead to community and organisational changes (Gray, 2004). At first the action research approach seemed 'too hot' in that a lot of work would need to be completed in the early stages by all of the practitioners involved in the study, it would take considerable time to work through all of the cycles, it could be hard for the researcher to be detached and impartial in approach (Denscombe, 2003) and because there are often tensions in

terms of ownership, leading to an abuse of power, influence and authority in the research process (Avison et al, 2001). Action research seemed 'too cold' because the research site can affect the extent to which generalisations can be made, limiting the study's potential for making a contribution to knowledge.

However, there were a number of reasons why it seemed that action research could be 'just right'. Action research has a strong focus on human development (Stringer, 1996), deals with real issues in the workplace (Denscombe, 2003), is used by practitioners to improve their professional practice (McNiff et al, 1999) and participants can apply what they have learned to their own contexts (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). Whilst the possibility could still exist for the researcher to influence the study in a number of ways based on her 'pre-understanding' of the institution and its people, the collaborative approach of action research could help to minimise some of the potential for researcher bias. Action research can be useful for the type of research where the aim is to uncover the lived reality of those involved in the study, rather than finding answers to problems (Stringer, 1999) and can be a useful way of learning about how things work (Bryman, 1988) as well as exploring the types of change that take place at the level of professional self development (Denscombe, 2003) which could provide a useful basis for exploring the experiences of the coaches, mentors and their clients involved in the study. As such it appears that action research is a methodology that could be 'just right' for answering the research question *'How are coaching and mentoring being used to support the alignment of academic staff and institutional strategy?'*

Grounded Theory

The principles of grounded theory involve the researcher 'making sense' of the social world by generating a theory grounded in the data and developing a formal framework for understanding the phenomenon being studied (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). For the researcher grounded theory seemed 'too big'; the fact that the approach does not allow for precise planning (Denscombe, 2003) seemed a disadvantage to a researcher who has some preference for structure and order when dealing with complex problems. The need for an open-minded approach (Denscombe, 2003) also raised the question of whether the researcher could put to one side her existing conceptions and experiences of the institution and its people when analysing the data, and its propensity towards a more singular, rather than collaborative, approach to research (McLeod, 2007) held little attraction for the researcher when compared to the opportunities for collaborative learning promised by action research.

However, grounded theory is an approach that uncovers the basic social processes that underlie behaviour, with people seen as purposeful agents engaged in action which results in, or is in response to, change (McLeod, 2007) and could therefore be helpful in answering the research question: *'How are coaching and mentoring being used to support the alignment of academic staff and institutional strategy?'* The fact that the researcher does not need to be constrained by the existing theoretical

frameworks of understanding outlined in the literature at the start of the study and can develop a theory from categorising the literature in a new, rather than standard, way (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) allows for some ingenuity and creativity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) that could potentially help to counter-balance the researcher's existing pre-understanding of the context for the study. More than this the clear and structured process for analysing the data could, if carried out correctly, allow the researcher to demonstrate that she had undertaken a rigorous study using a method of analysis that could meet the criteria 'for doing good science' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.27) that might satisfy those calling for scientific and rigorous approaches to coaching and mentoring research outlined earlier in this paper. There are a number of reasons therefore why grounded theory could be 'just right' for the coaching and mentoring study.

Case Study

A case study provides an opportunity to explore the complexity of a single case and the interactions within its contexts – a study of the particularity and complexity of a single case which helps the researcher to grow towards understanding the case (Stake, 1995). Case study is useful where the phenomenon being studied is not isolated from its context, but is of interest precisely because the aim is to understand how behaviour and/or process are influenced by and influence context (Hartley, 2004).

However, there were a number of reasons why the researcher believed that the case study approach may not be 'just right' for this study. The richness of the context can mean that the study can have more variables than data points (Yin, 2003) and there can be a tension between the case and the issues meaning that they demand more time for study than is available. The need to be able to find ways to confine the study seemed 'too hard' for a researcher who knows so much about the intricate workings of the organisation and its people under investigation in the study. Conversely it seemed that case study had the potential to be an approach that would be 'too soft' for the research study. Case study has been discredited as a weak methodology open to challenge (Yin, 2003). The uniqueness and particularity of case study is not always favoured as an intrinsic study of the particular as it can be in biography (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and can be a poor basis for generalisation (Stake, 1999). It has been described not as a methodological choice, but as a choice of object to be studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Conversely, case study approaches have been used to build knowledge of the individual and the organisation, as well as understanding around any complex social phenomena surrounding the case (Stake, 2006). Case study has the potential to capture the 'emergent and changing properties of life' in an organisation and the rich data collected in context would help to examine the research question by setting it in a contextual and causal context (Hartley, 2004, p. 323-3334). The researcher does have a strategic choice on ways in which to contain the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and Simons (1996) has described the paradox of case study as an in depth study of the particular that can facilitate a shift to a more universal and holistic understanding. Case study is therefore an approach that could be 'just right' for this

research study as it allows for an exploration of the context that could help the researcher to explain more fully the contextual issues affecting the alignment of academic staff and to therefore explore and explain more fully the unique contribution of coaching and mentoring when answering the research question: '*How are coaching and mentoring being used to support the alignment of academic staff and institutional strategy?*'

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to raise awareness of just some of the tensions and possibilities for the academic and the practitioner undertaking research into coaching and mentoring. The conundrums facing the researcher at every stage of the epistemological and methodological journey can be met in a variety of ways. The exploration of three possible methods for answering the research question in a coaching and mentoring study have demonstrated that each had distinct disadvantages as well as the potential to be 'just right' for answering the research question.

This paper has demonstrated the ways in which choosing a methodology for a research study is a 'time-consuming, personal and reflective process' (Goulding, 1999, p. 870). Coaching and mentoring researchers and practitioners are hearing the clarion call for good and rigorous research into coaching and mentoring and the first step must be in exploring and defending the methodological approaches selected by the researcher, grounded in the researcher's own understanding of his/her beliefs and style of working to ensure an appropriate fit between researcher and methodology and the potential for each to be 'just right' for answering the research question.

References

- Avison, D., Baskerville, R. & Myers, M. (2001) 'Controlling action research projects', *Information Technology & People*, Vol 14, No. 1, p. 28-45
- BERA, Insider and Outsider Research <http://www.bera.ac.uk/ethics-and-educational-research-philosophical-perspectives/insider-and-outsider-research/> [Accessed 10/04/09]
- Bridges, D. (2001) The ethics of outsider research, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 35, No. 3
- Bryman, A. (1988) *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*, London: Routledge
- Clutterbuck, D. (2008) What's happening in coaching and mentoring? And what is the difference between them? *Development and Learning in Organisations*, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 8-10
- Coghlan, D. (2001) Insider Action Research Projects: Implications for Practising Managers *Management Learning*, Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 49-60
- Coolican, H. (2004) *Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology*, London: Hodder Arnold.
- Creswell, J. & Plano Clark, V. (2007), *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, London: Sage.

- Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundation of Social Research: Meaning and Perspectives in the Research Process*, London: Sage
- Denscombe, M. (2003), *The Good Research Guide*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Drake, D. B. (2008) Finding our way home: coaching's search for identity in a new era, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research & Practice*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, p. 16-27
- Drake, D. B. (2009) Evidence Is a Verb: A Relational Approach to Knowledge and Mastery in Coaching, *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 1-12
- Fineman, S. (2005) Appreciating emotion at work: paradigm tensions, *International Journal Work Organisation and Emotion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, P. 4-19
- Fillery-Travis, A. & Lane, D. (2007) Research: does coaching work? In Palmer, S. & Whybrow, A. (Eds) *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A guide for practitioners*, London: Routledge
- Gibson, S. K. (2004) Mentoring in business and industry: the need for a phenomenological perspective, *Mentoring and Tutoring*, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 259-275
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter
- Goulding, C. (1999) Consumer research, interpretive paradigms and methodological ambiguities, *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 22, No. 9/10, p. 859-873
- Gray, D. (2004) *Doing Research in the Real World*, London: Sage Publications Ltd
- Grant, A. M. & Cavanagh, M. J. (2004) Toward a profession of coaching: Sixty-five years of progress and challenges for the future, *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 1-16
- Grant, A. M. & Zackon, R. (2004) Executive, Workplace and Life Coaching: Findings from a Large-Scale Survey of International Coach Federation Members, *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 1-15
- Hartley, J. (2004) Case Study Research in Cassell, C. & Symon, G. (eds) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*, London: Sage Publications
- Hezlett, S. A. & Gibson, S. K. (2005) Mentoring and Human Resource Development: Where We Are and Where We Need to Go, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 46-449
- Hussey, J. & Hussey, R. (1997), *Business Research*, London: MacMillan Business.
- Kauffman, C. & Bachkirova, T. (2008a) An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice: why does it matter? *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, p. 1-7
- Kauffman, C. & Bachkirova, T. (2008b) Many ways of knowing: how to make sense of different research perspectives in studies of coaching, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 107-113
- McNiff, J., Lomax, P. & Whitehead, J. (1996), *You and Your Action Research Project*, London: Hyde Publications.

- Passmore, J. & Gibbs, C. (2007) The state of executive coaching research: What does the current literature tell us and what's next for coaching research?
International Coaching Psychology Review, Vol. 2 No. 2
- McLeod, J. (2007) *Qualitative Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, London: SAGE Publications
- Simons, H. (1996) The Paradox of Case Study, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol.26 No. p.225-40
- Stake, R. E. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*. London: Sage
- Stober, D. R., Wildflower, L. & Drake, D. (2006) Evidence-Based Practice: A Potential Approach for Effective Coaching, *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring*, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 1-8
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: Sage
- Stringer, E.T. (1996), *Action Research*, London: Sage Publications
- Stringer, E.T. (1999), *Action Research 2nd Edition*, London: Sage Publications.
- Wellington, J., Bathmaker, A-M., Hunt, C., McCulloch, G. & Sikes, P. (2005) *Succeeding with your Doctorate*, London: SAGE Publications
- Yin, R. K. (2003) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods Third Edition*, London: Sage Publications

Colleen Harding is the Staff Development Manager at a University in the South of England and a part-time student at Oxford Brookes University undertaking the Professional Doctorate in Coaching and Mentoring. Colleen has worked in higher education for 11 years and previously spent 13 years working for Marks and Spencer in a variety of human resource management roles.