

Academic Paper

How do coaches and clients create and experience thinking environments?

Donna Johnston 

Abstract

This constructivist grounded theory research explored how coaches facilitate clients to become critical in their coaching environment. Critical thinking has been described as a core competency and skill that is needed for leaders since a deficiency in critical thinking skills creates consequences for individuals as well as their organisations. Constructivist grounded theory methodology was used for this research as a systematic and rigorous method for the data collection and analysis. Interviews were conducted with coaches and clients through a total of 40 interviews. The narratives of these experiences were used to develop a theoretical framework which shows the importance of three elements that come together to create a critical thinking environment for coaching: contracting, thinking space and the physical environment.

Keywords

critical thinking, thinking environments, thinking space, physical environment, coaching, constructivist grounded theory,

Article history

Accepted for publication: 12 May 2021

Published online: 01 July 2021



© the Author(s)

Published by Oxford Brookes University

Introduction

Critical thinking, as a term, is widely used to describe aspects of thinking effectiveness but, to date, it appears to be absent from the vocabulary of coaching. In this paper I present research exploring how coaches and clients create and experience a critical thinking environment, including the use of Kline's (1999) thinking environment model. The aim of coaching in this context is for the coach to facilitate clients to become critical thinkers in their coaching environment and consider what enables that to happen. Critical thinking comprises competencies and a set of skills that incorporate capability to make decisions by analysing and exploring issues, evaluating all options that are available, identifying and understanding the existence of assumptions, and reaching conclusions on the basis of evidence and reasoning (Walker & Diaz, 2003).

Critical thinking has been described as a required competency and skill by leaders in organisations where rapid change is constant (Catchings, 2015). A deficit of people not having critical thinking

skills creates consequences for individuals and organisations (Catchings, 2015). Furthermore, as Flores (2012) argue, a scarcity of critical thinking skills results in a lack of ability to lead others. In addition, the idea of slowing down to stop and think to produce better outcomes can often feel counterintuitive, particularly where people are paid to produce results quickly and deadlines are the norm. It could be argued that the need for speed and results evolved as the result of the industrial age (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003) and now both educators and employers are demanding that critical thinking skills are developed (Davis & Botkin, 1995; Brookfield, 1987). It is claimed that, to endure and survive in the current age, people need to ask questions as well as challenge assumptions and find ways to solve problems. That said, there seem to be too few discussions concerning the value and efficacy of specific interventions in critical thinking (McPeck, 2017) and an absence of agreement among researchers on what the concept of critical thinking actually is and the different terms used in this field of research.

By considering critical thinking and the conditions that create thinking environments in coaching, it is possible that coaches do create critical thinking environments, but these are not identified or named as such; apart from Kline's (1999) thinking environment model and the frequent reference to the importance of reflection in the coaching texts.

As a coach, my research interest is in clients' innate abilities to think for themselves. This study examines the micro aspects of the thinking that takes place between the coach and client before, during, and after a coaching conversation. Alongside the elements of listening, questioning, clarifying, reflecting, and challenging, thinking is also one of the gaps that researchers argue has yet to be studied well (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2014, p. 453). In addition, I selected constructivist grounded theory as the methodology for this research because it offers a systematic and rigorous approach for the collection of data and analysis. The constructivist epistemology chimes with my own perception of meaning making as constructed and interpreted. This methodology allows for the construction of a theory that is grounded in participants' views and experiences, which lends itself well to this research given that it focuses on the field of coaching for both coaches and clients.

Literature

To understand what is meant by the creation of a thinking environment, it was important to research literature that helps us understand how coaches and clients experience and create environments in which they (coaches and clients) can think critically. The review reveals that limited empirical research has been conducted in thinking environments in coaching (Bassot & Reid, 2013), although there are some studies within business, healthcare, and education (Hunter, 2018; Hall, 2013; Blackman, 2006; Anderson & Betz, 2001; Wasylyshyn, 2003). More research that examines thinking environments in coaching is necessary; without stronger theoretical foundations and empirical research to provide sufficient evidence to support thinking environments, it is possible that the concept of this may become nothing more than a passing trend (Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

For more than a century, research in critical thinking in education has attempted to evaluate the efficacy of specific interventions in critical thinking (McPeck, 2017). Despite these efforts, an absence remains of published studies remain on the role of critical thinking in coaching where other kinds of thinking associated with coaching, such as critical reflection, reflection on action and reflection in action are understood and accepted as methods of improving the ways in which people think.

Critical thinking and reflection

In the literature on critical thinking different terminologies are used to describe similar thinking processes. In addition, the literature also indicates that critical thinking, critical reflection, and transformational learning are all question-based models designed to nurture deeper thinking.

Multidisciplinary research into critical thinking outside of coaching has been substantial, with definitions stemming from educators in the early 1900s through to the present day. Dewey's (1933) early research noted the importance of developing critical thinking skills ('habits of mind') for unravelling problems. More recently, Jiang and Yang (2015) have contended that 'employees with strong critical thinking ability can identify problems from complicated situations, gather relevant information, and create alternative solutions' (p. 1228); their thinking is aligned with that of Walker and Diaz (2003), who argue that critical thinking consists of a skill set which helps an individual to make decisions by evaluating all of their options and allowing them to recognise the existence of assumptions.

Various views have been adopted to describe critical thinking, including Brookfield's, (1987) reference to the ability to analyse events and understand and reason the origins of situations, where he states 'critical thinking is an activity that identifies and challenges assumptions as well as explores and imagines alternatives' (pp. 15,229). Further, Price (2004) suggests, critical thinking involves considering the relationship between events themselves and their possible causes and effects. Ennis (1989, p. 152) identifies ideal dispositions for engaging in critical thinking, including being reflectively aware of one's own basic beliefs and being prepared to discover and listen to others' views and reasoning and Flores and Matkin, (2012) propose that critical thinking encompasses openness to alternative viewpoints as well as introspective reflection. Indeed, reflection is seen as critical to the thinking process (Grossman, 2009) and, as Ntuen and Leedom (2007) describe, critical thinking is a structured process which involves reflective thinking on different ideas, perceptions, and beliefs. Similar to reflection, critical thinking involves considering and thinking about what has already happened and what could happen (Clark & Holt, 2001).

Grant (2005) argues that coaches need to have developed critical thinking skills, which give a coach the capability to analyse and construct rigorous and robust arguments and to engage in critical discussion. When coaches become critical thinkers in their coaching practices, they can develop an appreciation and understanding of the assumptions under which they and their clients may think and act (Cox, 2013).

In coaching, the term 'reflection' seems to be overused and thus may have lost its meaning. Perceptions and understandings of the application of reflection are varied, which means that coaches may engage in reflection in various ways (Cropley et al., 2012; Knowles et al., 2006). Many terms are used to refer to the practice (e.g., reflection, reflective practice, reflective practitioner, and critical reflection); the meanings of these terms may differ and are dependent on the underlying assumptions as well as the context in which they are being used. Both Brookfield (1987) and Mezirow (2000) encourage reflection to enable learning. In coaching, reflection is where clients learn to understand their feelings, beliefs, and assumptions and learn from their mistakes, explore and understand their successes, and thus develop empathy and gain understanding and appreciation (Cox, 2013). Cox argues that such development is key and is an essential practice for both the client and the coach.

Another difficulty in researching reflection in coaching is that it is challenging to separate and analyse the reflective component to test it (Jones, 2021). Few researchers have separated critical thinking from reflection; however, Price (2004) and Cox (2013) have both explored reflection as a way to renew contact with experience as a precursor to critical thinking. Using a reflective process, such as content, process and premise reflection (Mezirow, 2000), a model of structured reflection (Johns, 2009), Dye's (2006) iterative 'SOAP' model or phenomenological reflecting (Husserl, 1920; Vermersch, 1999), a coach can work with a client to reflect on an event to gain a deep description and understanding of emotions, themes and structures. Vermersch (1999) argued that using a reflective process, such as the phenomenological method, enables the client to produce more from the examined event than mere recollection. Thus, reflection provides the basis from which the coach and client go on to deconstruct and reason the origins of situations (Price, 2004). Cox (2013) explained there is a symbiotic relationship between phenomenological reflection and critical

thinking. It could be argued from this perspective that reflection describes the issue, whilst thinking critically provides an opportunity to evaluate and redefine values, beliefs and assumptions.

In addition, reflection is not only between coach and client. It has been argued that before engaging in coaching, a coach should reflect on 'self' to surface their own existing values, beliefs and prejudices, so as to not confound the coaching content or direction (Kemp, 2011). Campone (2011) discusses how reflective practice is a critical skill for coaches. Greenfield and Jensen (2010) note that this process demands not only commitment but also ongoing self-reflection.

Unlike critical thinking, the objective of reflection in coaching is for the client to be able to accept the essence or meaning of an experience, as a result of which they can gain an insight. The client may require time to 'sit with' and attempt to 're-live' the experience in critical reflection so they are able to become comfortable with it and accept it as indicating something valuable (Van Manen, 1990). Johns (1994) maintains that reflection should always be coached to prevent meanings from being distorted or twisted out of context. Mezirow (2000) states that when knowledge is supported through dialogue with another it is possible to recognise, for example, patterns of similarity.

As can be seen from this introduction into critical thinking and reflection, through a coaching engagement a coach can facilitate the client's development of critical skills by challenging the client's assumptions and experiences and providing opportunities for the client to consider a range of different perspectives. Cox (2013) noted that there is an interdependent relationship between reflection and critical thinking. However, although reflection and critical thinking involve different levels of thinking, each is dependent on the other. For the coach and client to think critically, they must investigate alternative scenarios and realities (Price, 2004) and observe their values and beliefs, as well as any underlying assumptions (Cox, 2013). The term critical thinking is defined in this research as a thinking process in which the client focuses and decides on what they need to believe or do.

Thinking environments and coaching

Researchers have identified various contexts for thinking environments. These include exploring hierarchies in organisations (Schwan, 1997), creating thinking environments in meetings (Havers, 2008), as well as the experience of leadership and power (Dangor, 1994).

The research suggests that people are affected not only by their interactions with other people but also by the environment in which an interaction takes place, whether this be in the office, in the workplace, or out in nature, for example. The term 'thinking environment' is referred to in different contexts, one being Kline's thinking environment model (1999), comprising ten components, or principles, that the coach and client adhere to. It is now over 20 years since *Time to Think* (Kline, 1999) was published, and despite the popularity and appeal of Kline's model among practitioners, it can be argued that this approach is still not regarded as mainstream in the business world, especially in large organisations. Indeed, the current research revealed that Kline's work is not referenced widely within academic literature.

Since the 1970s, Kline claims to have guided many organisations in developing 'thinking environments' that foster thinking that is clear and deep and in turn enhances performance and results (Kline, 1999). Recently a change has transpired in the approach developed by Kline towards a coaching style that promotes bracketing out the coach (with the emphasis on the client) using a set of predetermined questions, this enhances the client's experience, thinking, and learning (Wallis, 2015).

Stout-Rostron (2009) states that there are two kinds of thinking environments: one that is provided by the coach and another that is provided internally, existing in the mind of the client. Stout-Rostron (2009) agrees with Kline (1999) that both kinds of environments are indeed affected by limited

assumptions individually and in society as a whole. Both Kline and Stout-Rostron argue that assumptions are fuelled by our own life experiences and that these assumptions need to be unblocked. These assumptions can be related to the individual, other people, or the systems in which a person works. Later, Stout-Rostron (2019) argued that a coaching conversation results in the development and deepening of the coaching relationship itself. She asserts that this relationship creates a safe thinking environment and helps the client to initiate change.

Kline (1999) contends that it is the coach who is keeping his or her attention all together in three different areas. The coach's focal point is on the client's narrative itself (in terms of content); the coach comes to be aware of what his or her are thinking in answer to their client's narrative; and his or her attention enables a thinking environment beneficial for the client. The thinking environment places the onus on both the coach and the client to be aware of, and take responsibility for, the environment that is created. Although Kline makes no specific reference to critical thinking, her model of a set of questions with a clear sequence shares some of the characteristics of critical thinking. It could follow that the thinking environment she proposes is a form of critical thinking.

Stout-Rostron (2009) discusses and outlines professionalisation in the coaching industry, how coaching conversations provide thinking environments, and how business professionals can develop and improve self-awareness and develop an in-depth understanding of who they are – embedding newly acquired skills, competences, and attitudes. These thinking environments are built between the coach and the client, and the true value in coaching is to create an environment where the client is given the freedom to think effectively, present ideas, and feel a sense of equality.

Although I found very little literature concerning the physical environment and its impact in terms of where coaching takes place, coaches and clients are affected not only by their interaction but also by the environment in which that interaction takes place, whether in the office or place of work or at a venue outside of the workplace. The environment has an impact on the people's ability to think, so careful consideration needs to be given to where coaching takes place.

Numerous models have been designed and developed to provide coaches with insight into their impact on the coaching environment. This study considers the conditions that need to be in place to create a thinking environment.

Methodology

A qualitative approach, employing constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was adopted for this research. Charmaz (2000) has consistently argued since the early 1990s that a constructivist grounded theory approach is possible since 'data itself does not necessarily provide a window on reality. It is the 'discovered' reality that arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts' (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). Constructivist grounded theory gives a voice to participants, and Charmaz (2014) encourages grounded theory researchers to incorporate the many voices and views of participants' interpretations of their lived/living experiences. This approach is key to finding out how people create and experience a critical thinking environment in coaching. Charmaz (2006) goes further in maintaining that it is not appropriate to retain a distant relationship with participants, where researchers then undertake the role of the 'authoritative expert.' In a coaching relationship, both the coach and the coached are perceived as being equal (Hardingham, 2004) and a unique, equally co-created, evolving relationship exists (O'Broin et al., 2008).

Grounded theory produces an emergent theory: rather than starting from a view of existing theory and predefined ideas, the theory itself is realised from the data and is a methodical generation of theory from data which contains inductive thinking. There is little theory to draw on in thinking environments, so I wanted to examine what happens in practice with practitioners and draw theory

from their practice. Grounded theory was selected because it can be used to obtain new theoretical understandings where theory is inadequate or incomplete (Walsh et al., 2015).

Data collection and analysis

Constructivist grounded theory encourages the person undertaking the study to look for data where it can be found (Charmaz, 2014). I needed to recruit coaches and clients to meet the criteria for my study and so participants had a broad general knowledge of the topic and were from various cultures and organisations and also included self-employed coaches in order to provide a broad range of perspectives for the study. The participants formed three groups:

- a. coaches who followed Nancy Kline's model fully (a group I called 'Kline disciples');
- b. coaches who followed Kline's model, but may have adapted it to suit their coaching practice (a group I called 'Kline followers'; and
- c. clients who had experienced a thinking environment in some form.

Seeking data from individuals experienced in these fields was essential in obtaining rich data. The aim was to interview 40 participants in total. The organisations identified ranged from finance, policing, to professional football.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. This is used as a method of gathering data in qualitative research which is regularly used in grounded theory research (Willig, 2013; Birks & Mills, 2015) because, as Charmaz (2014) outlines, this type of interviewing creates a flexible approach with open spaces where ideas can be created, and issues addressed accordingly.

Findings

The research findings highlighted three critical areas when creating a critical thinking environment for coaching:

Category 1: Contracting – Establishing the relationship

Category 2: Thinking space – Deepening the relationship

Category 3: Physical environment – Situating the relationship

The research suggested that all three categories should be considered together in order to achieve an optimum critical thinking environment in coaching. These are the most important elements in creating the thinking environment, and these features were common to both coaches and clients. I shall discuss each category in more detail.

1. Contracting – Establishing the relationship

Based on the review of the coaching literature and models of coaching practice, and the research undertaken in this study, contracting to establish a critical thinking environment is essential. Contracting gives direction and purpose to the coaching engagement for both coach and client, aligns coach and client perceptions, creates buy-in, reduces ambiguity, builds rapport and connection and eases concerns regarding confidentiality and safety (Turner & Hawkins, 2016) that could impede the relationship and thus stop a critical thinking environment from being created. As Cox (2013) outlines, with the right ingredients coaching creates an environment that is conducive to reflection and critical thinking. If psychological safety (Kahn, 1990) is created through contracting this will allow the client to critically reflect on themselves and critically think, which in turn enables the client to develop a new perspective on their experiences.

The research highlights that coaches and clients that engage in contracting behaviours (e.g., discuss expectations, commitment, responsibilities) seem more likely to create a mutual understanding (partnership) and agreement on the goals and methods for development through these types of discussions:

During coaching, things can change, like goals, where you work. This needs to be taken into account, as this changes what you need. (KD003)

As a client, you change as you are being coached. This needs to be considered, as your outputs change as well. (CL0037)

A mutual agreement, it may start with, as a client I move and change as does my coach, that needs to be considered. (CL025)

The contracting process provides a mutual agreement on goals, roles, and expectations and thus seems to engender a shared purpose (connection), and the clear explication of parameters may increase trust in the coach and client motivations and intentions. Indeed, as the research highlights, by replacing ambiguity with clarity seems to build a connection, increase trust and commitment at the start of the coaching engagement. These findings lend support to the idea that what occurs early in a coaching engagement (when contracting normally occurs), and the impression a coach and client makes early on, may be especially impactful in the establishing and deepening of the coach-client relationship. Thus, contracting is especially crucial to create and experience a critical thinking environment in coaching.

The participants also considered that contracting in coaching was positively related to the establishment of the coach-client relationship, supporting the proposition that contracting is important in establishing the coaching relationship, without which critical thinking is less likely to happen. Coaches and clients discussed the need for contracting both at the outset and throughout the duration of the coaching relationship to incorporate changes in circumstances and goals that may occur. The findings suggest that contracting needs to take place before coaching commences and deepening and maintaining a good relationship between coach and client is an essential factor for successful coaching.

2. Thinking space – Deepening the relationship

The theme ‘thinking space – deepening the relationship’ emerged from how coaches and clients engage in new thinking through creating a thinking space together. The findings illustrated that both the coach and client need to be willing to enter the co-created space.

Coaches, through their presence and behaviour, make the quality of the thinking space through co-creating it with the client and ensuring that equality exists, in the coaching relationship. Both the coaches and the clients emphasised the importance of equality. The coach needs an understanding of the context of the coaching session, which includes listening to the client and being actively involved in the thinking space during coaching:

The coach needs to have the ability to go into the thinking space themselves. If they cannot, then it's unlikely they can lead their client into that space. They need to make a difference with their presence; they have the ability to go into and hold that thinking space for themselves and for their client. I have chosen and made a conscious decision that I am going to be creating a thinking environment, and we have both agreed that is what we are doing. So, because of that there is equality, this is what the thinking environment looks like. (CL025)

In particular, trust and rapport were identified, as being necessary requirements for the development of a coaching relationship. The importance of trust was repeatedly emphasised by

both coaches and clients when discussing the creation of a thinking space. The respondents indicated the importance of establishing trust between the coach and client. When trust is created and established, this helps to build rapport with the client and in turn further develops the relationship with the client by enabling the coach to create a connection with the client. In addition, trust and rapport enables the client to explore and connect with their own feelings and emotions in the thinking space created:

Trust, honesty, willingness to push past challenges, and expression of feeling, no matter what it takes. When those things are created and built upon, and they don't take long, funnily enough, when they have been created, you have this rapport. You have this symbiotic relationship; this makes it easier to create an environment to think. (KD002)

While coaches are able to connect with, trust in, and be present for the client, they are also able to think with the client, thus enabling the client to take risks and have the freedom to think in the space that has been created. Trust is considered to be necessary within the coaching relationship, as it allows the coach to challenge the client at a deeper level. When trust is present in the relationship, the coach is able to give the client time to arrive at their own conclusions; in addition, trust creates mutual confidence, which allows the client to be open, honest, and vulnerable. When mutual security and confidence is established between both client and coach, it enables expectations to be managed, boundaries established, and open and honest dialogue developed. Trust and critical thinking, are interdependent (Kleinig, 2018), if critical thinking is to take place with the client, trust in the coach seems to be a necessary requirement.

Trust deepens and develops in the ongoing interactions between coach and client, enabling them both to take risks in the coaching relationship and the thinking space that is built between them. The data indicate that establishing trust is one of the foundations of a coaching relationship intended to create a critical thinking environment. Clients perceive trust not only in relation to confidentiality and what is shared but also in the skills of the coach in managing the content of the coaching conversation and thus creating the space in which this takes place. Respondents identified trust between the coach and client as being crucial in a coaching relationship intended to enable critical thinking.

Another important finding that emerged from the research was the importance of silence and coaches' ability to listen effectively to their client. Silence may be a skill that takes a coach some time to master and feel comfortable with. In addition, clients discussed the importance of not feeling anxious during silence and indicated that the right atmosphere needs to be established, otherwise unease can arise between the coach-client:

I trust the coach to be able to make space and not feel anxiety at the silence, which can be deeply uncomfortable. (CL027)

A notable aspect of the coaching relationship is encouragement by the coach towards the client, reassuring the client that they may stay focused on their thinking and also giving them permission to think in a different way or even to take a risk. Encouragement allows independent thinking and more autonomous moral judgement, as well as surfacing independent opinions (Assor & Kaplan, 2001). The client will likely feel that they can continue to think for themselves and respect the coach for encouraging the created thinking space.

Encouragement can be conveyed non-verbally through body language. The use of body language by clients can also indicate a shift in thinking or a new thought being recognised. Body language can also help the coach notice avoidant behaviour. What a client may avoid saying is as vital as what they do say; therefore, noticing tone of voice, body language, and other non-verbal communications is a vital skill on the part of a coach (Passmore, 2010a, b). Encouragement and respect combined create the space needed in a coaching relationship and are key attributes of a good coach.

The analysis of the data suggests that to create a critical thinking environment in a relationship, it is important to promote mutual respect, regardless of goals or differences, to encourage individuals to contribute to the coaching session. Mutual respect in coaching is established through recognition of the abilities and skills between the coach and client.

The manner in which coaches put questions to their clients appears to create ease in the coach-client relationship, which in turn helps the client to uncover their assumptions and promotes the creation of a thinking space by asking probing questions to help the client uncover their assumptions and, with the right conditions, will also provide them with an opportunity to question the validity of these assumptions. Ease gives the client permission to explore concepts that they might normally avoid or not consider.

Putting the client at ease – you listen for the things that might be holding somebody back or might be a challenge or might be something they can't see for some reason. Incisive questions might be something I ask, examine their assumptions. (KD001)

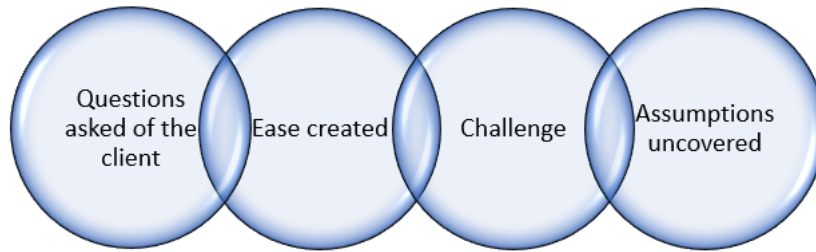
Paraphrasing and reflecting is useful as a starting point in coaching, however, for wider, fresher or new ideas that helps the client to gain a broader understanding of themselves and the world in which they operate (Cox, 2013) existing assumptions need to be addressed and uncovered. Reflection in coaching describes the issue that the client has, whilst thinking critically provides an opportunity for the client to understand, evaluate and redefine their values, beliefs and assumptions (Vermersch, 1999). The skill of the coach is paramount when asking the right questions, reflecting, and showing the client that the coach is listening through paraphrasing and asking further clarifying questions, all of which should be done in the service of the client's critical thinking. The coaching relationship is implicitly linked to the questions a coach might ask a client (Stout-Rostron, 2006). It seems that underpinning this develops a respectful and trusting relationship between coach and client, thus allowing the coach to challenge the client in a constructive manner.

A potential difficulty that can arise when encouraging clients to think critically is evoking an emotive response. Asking critical questions about a clients previously accepted values, ideas and behaviours can be anxiety producing (Brookfield, 1987). Coaches need to not only be aware of but also be able to address these emotive responses accordingly. When following a model that involves structured questions, such as Kline's model, emotions could be overlooked which means that the right question might not be asked.

As Cox (2012) outlined, clients start to trust their coach enough to accept a challenge after an adequate amount of time, after contracting and the coach and client getting to know each other. The right to challenge someone needs to be earned (Brookfield, 1987). A central premise of coaching is facilitating clients to become more critical in their own thinking. This research highlights the importance of co-creating a safe environment where, if the right conditions (willingness, trust, ease, equality, and respect) are met, clients will be open to being challenged. Establishing and deepening the coaching relationship and the corresponding groundwork this provides, is a starting point for the coach to challenge the client to consider alternative approaches or revise their thinking. It simply is not sufficient to remain at a superficial level of challenge with the client.

Based on the data from the research, in the context of a coaching relationship, there appears to be a progression towards uncovering assumptions which would enable a client to free their thinking about an issue, thus creating a thinking space. Figure 1 illustrates that when the coach asks relevant questions, the client experiences a sense of ease. Once this state has been established between the coach and client, the coach is able to further challenge the client, which may reveal any assumptions that may be holding the client back.

Figure 1: Thinking environment progression



Overall, the findings indicate that a combination of interrelated actions and emotions create an effective coaching relationship where critical thinking can be created and occur. Critical thinking involves questioning the client's assumptions which may underlie their accustomed and habitual ways of thinking and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of the critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987) that has taken place. The data revealed that asking the right questions to access deeper critical thinking, responding to emotional cues, paraphrasing or repeating words back to the client, listening and noticing assumptions, creating a sense of ease to further challenge the client, and allowing the client to sit within the thinking space without interruption all play an important role in establishing the coach-client relationship.

3. Physical environment – Situating the relationship

The findings showed that the physical environment where coaching takes place has an impact on coaching outcomes. Despite little research to date on what makes for a good physical coaching environment, the physical environment was seen as imperative to achieve a critical thinking environment between the coach and client. Coaches and clients emphasised that being taken away from their work environment was important to allow coaching to take place without interruption, disruption and the influence of the organisational culture or their role.

Coaches and clients may have different preferences when deciding and choosing on the physical space where coaching should take place, with that in mind, a recommendation could be that the place where coaching takes place, whether physical or virtual should become a part of the contracting session and should be reviewed on a regular basis throughout the coaching relationship:

Physical space, I think, is really important. Do I matter? I think in a corporate space, you have some of those amazing buildings, we have got, they really make, you feel like you matter. Where I can, I get out of the corporate environment. (CL023)

Thus the physical environment can influence and affect the emotions that individuals experience, and emotions, subsequently, can impact goals and performance. If the physical environment is not satisfactory to the coach and client, this can affect the quality of the coaching that is undertaken, and the goals attained.

Another finding suggested that people react differently to qualities of the physical environment, psychologically, behaviourally as well as physically. It was highlighted that coaching should take place in a comfortable space, in a room that is private and free of interruptions. A finding from this research could be that the coach and client agree, as part of their initial contract, the physical environment where the coaching will take place to obtain the best outcome for both. Coaching can take place in various physical environments. It may be seen as static (coaching in one place), although it can also be considered as moveable, coaching could take place in an office or workplace, or informal spaces, for example in a pub or cafe.

Coaches and clients in this research discussed the benefits of undertaking coaching outside and in nature. Outdoor space or an outside view can generate a positive response in people and improve a person's thinking. Natural views have also been linked to improving a person's mood. In addition, walking helps the brain to deal with negative emotions, such as anxiety and stress and can help the brain function at an optimal level:

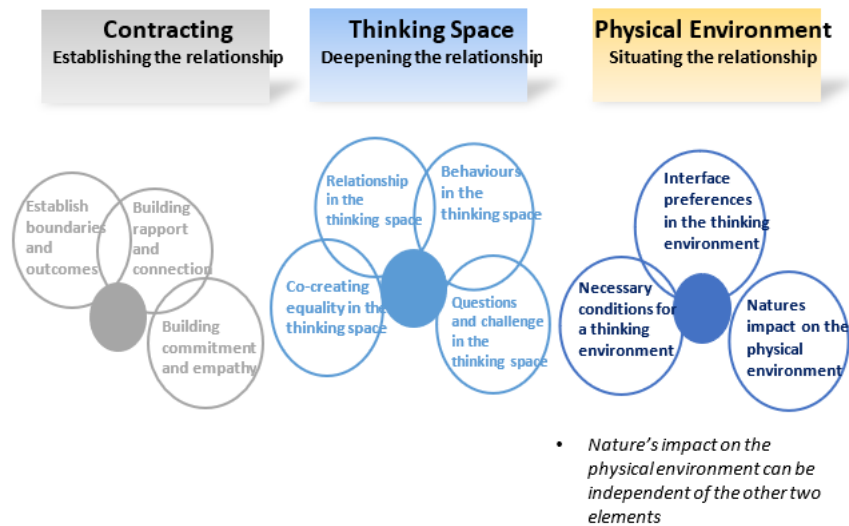
We do walking in pairs, we walk outside on the promenade near the sea, and we walk and think. It's amazing how the movement of fresh air, and not looking directly at the person, its different. (CL026)

Many of the clients showed a clear preference for wanting virtual rather than face to face coaching. In contrast, coaches showed a preference for face to face meetings, especially at the start of the coaching relationship. The need for natural daylight was also expressed in relation to coaching virtually, although this was not such a common finding with clients. Furthermore, the findings suggest that for a positive effect, the rooms where coaching takes place should be large, with natural light. Research into natural daylight has been associated with improving people's mood, increasing morale and lower fatigue and also focusing a person's thinking which would have a positive impact on coaching.

The physical environment in which coaching takes place creates a critical thinking environment for both coaches and clients. It is also key that the physical environmental impact should be considered, for example, where and how the coaching takes place (either virtual or face-to-face). This study showed that, in order to establish the coaching relationship, clients preferred the first coaching session to be face-to-face before progressing to virtual coaching, indicating that the initial face-to-face contact had a positive impact on building a better coach and client relationship. It could be argued that coaches seem to have more of an issue with the virtual aspect of coaching being a success than clients do

As shown in Figure 2, each element of the critical thinking environment framework needs to be considered to create a critical thinking environment for the coach and client. The elements are interconnected: for example, if the contracting element of this model is missed out, then the basics for establishing the relationship with the client is missed; it will then be a challenge to create and experience a critical thinking environment. If the contracting and thinking space elements are met, but the coaching takes place in a physical environment that does not suit the client, the optimum critical thinking environment is inhibited. The exception is the element of the impact of nature on the physical environment, which is not co-dependent on the other two elements of the environment (interface preferences in the thinking environment, and necessary conditions for a thinking environment).

Figure 2: Critical thinking environment framework



Conclusion

This study provides a framework where coaches could gain an understanding of what creates a thinking environment for both themselves and clients if they are more aware of the underlying mechanisms to achieve this. Coaches and clients can become active participants in creating the critical thinking environment rather than being passive recipients. The framework is specifically designed to increase the awareness of coaches and clients, and the study has contributed towards the theory of a critical thinking by highlighting the importance of contracting, the relationship and the physical environment. Professional bodies in coaching can understand the important role of critical thinking in coaching by using the framework outlined in this research.

Limitations and areas for further research

A limitation of this study is that all the coaches in this research were experienced and had at least five years' coaching experience. Involving coaches with less experience may have created different findings. In this study, some of the clients I interviewed also had coaching experience; again, they may have been using their experience as a coach to consider some of the questions that I asked in the interview.

Further research into the physical environment and coaching would be beneficial as this study only just began to uncover some deep and meaningful findings in relation to the impact of the physical environment, the implications of which affects both coaches and clients.

References

- Anderson, S. and Betz, N. (2001) 'Sources of social self-efficacy expectations: Their measurement and relation to career development', *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 58, pp.98-117. DOI: [10.1006/jvbe.2000.1753](https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.2000.1753).
- Bassot, B. and Reid, H. (2013) 'Constructing a space for career reflection: "The gift of time to think"', *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 22(2), pp.91-99. DOI: [10.1177/1038416213497193](https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416213497193).
- Birks, M. and Mills, J. (2015) *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide* (2nd edn.). London: Sage.
- Blackman, A. (2006) 'Factors that contribute to the effectiveness of business coaching: The coachees perspective', *The Business Review*, 5(1), pp.98-104.

- Brookfield, S. (1987) *Developing critical thinkers*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Campone, F. (2011) 'The reflective coaching practitioner model', in Passmore, J. (eds.) *Supervision in coaching: Supervision, ethics and continuous professional development*. London: Kogan Page.
- Catchings, G. (2015) 'A practical coaching model for critical thinking skill and leadership development (C/CTSLD)', *Management and Organizational Studies*, 2(4), pp.42-53. DOI: [10.5430/mos.v2n4p42](https://doi.org/10.5430/mos.v2n4p42).
- Charmaz, K. (2012) 'The Power and Potential of Grounded Theory', *A Journal of the BSA Medical Sociology Group*, 6(3), pp.2-15.
- Charmaz, K. (2000) 'Constructivist and objectivist grounded theory', in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd edn.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp.509-536.
- Charmaz, K. (2008) 'Grounded theory', in Willig, C. and Stainton Rogers, W. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd edn.). London: Sage.
- Clark, D. and Holt, J. (2001) 'Philosophy: a key to open the door to critical thinking', *Nurse education today*, 20(3), pp.71-78.
- Cox, E. (2012) 'Individual and Organizational Trust in a Reciprocal Peer Coaching Context', *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 20(3), pp.427-443. DOI: [10.1080/13611267.2012.701967](https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2012.701967).
- Cox, E. (2013) *Coaching understood: A pragmatic inquiry into the coaching process*. London: Sage.
- Cropley, B., Hanton, S., Miles, A. and Niven, A. (2010) 'Exploring the relationship between effective and reflective practice in applied sport psychology', *The Sport Psychologist*, 24(4), pp.521-541. DOI: [10.1123/tsp.24.4](https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.24.4).
- Dangor, Z. (1994) *The Experience of Leadership and Power*. Berlin: Lola Press.
- Davis, S. and Botkin, J. (1995) *The monster under the bed*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Dewey, J. (1933) *How we think: a re-statement of the relation of reflective thinking in the educative process*. Chicago: Henry Regnery.
- Dulewicz, V. and Higgs, M. (2003) 'Leadership at the Top: The need for Emotional Intelligence in Organizations', *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 11(3), pp.193-210. DOI: [10.1108/eb028971](https://doi.org/10.1108/eb028971).
- Dye, D. (2006) 'Enhancing critical reflection of students during a clinical internship using the self-SOAP note', *The Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice*, 3(4).
- Ennis, R.H. (1989) 'Critical thinking and subject specificity: Clarification and needed research', *Educational Researcher*, 18(3), pp.4-10.
- Feldman, D.C. and Lankau, M.J. (2005) 'Executive Coaching: A Review and Agenda for Future Research', *Journal of Management*, 31(6), pp.829-848. DOI: [10.1177/0149206305279599](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305279599).
- Fillery-Travis, A. and Cox, E. (2014) 'Researching coaching', in Cox, E., Bachkirova, T. and Clutterbuck, D. (eds.) *The complete handbook of coaching* (2nd edn.). London: Sage, pp.445-459.
- Flores, K.L., Matkin, G.S., Burbach, M.E. and et al, (2012) 'Deficient Critical Thinking Skills Among College Graduates: Implications for Leadership', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(2). DOI: [10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00672.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00672.x).
- Grant, A.M. (2005) 'What is evidence-based executive, workplace and life coaching?', in Grant, A.M., Cavanagh, M. and Kemp, T. (eds.) *Evidence-based coaching Vol. 1: Theory, research and practice from the behavioural sciences*. Bowen Hills, QLD: Australian Academic Press, pp.1-12.
- Grossman, R. (2009) 'Structures for Facilitating Student Reflection', *College Teaching*, 57(1), pp.15-22. DOI: [10.3200/CTCH.57.1.15-22](https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.57.1.15-22).
- Havers, E. (2008) *A study of whether, and how meetings held in a Thinking Environment® impact organisational life [Précis of a Masters Research thesis]*. Henley Business School .
- Hunter, M. (2018) *Creating a Thinking Environment for English Language Learners. A Model for Staff Development Training [Précis of a Masters Research thesis]*. University of Chester .
- Jiang, J. and Yang, B. (2018) 'Employees' critical thinking, leaders' inspirational motivation, and voice behavior: The mediating role of voice efficacy', *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, 17(1), pp.33-41. DOI: [10.1027/1866-5888/a000193](https://doi.org/10.1027/1866-5888/a000193).
- Johns, C. (2009) *Becoming a reflective practitioner*. London: Wiley.
- Jones, R.J. (2021) *Coaching with Research in Mind*. London: Routledge.
- Kahn, W.A. (1990) 'Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work', *Academy of Management Journal*, 33, pp.692-724. DOI: [10.5465/256287](https://doi.org/10.5465/256287).
- Kemp, T. (2011) 'Building the coaching alliance', in Hertz-Broome, G. and Boyce, L.A. (eds.) *Advancing executive coaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp.151-176.

- Kleinig, J. (2018) 'Trust and critical thinking', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(2). DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2016.1144167](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2016.1144167).
- Kline, N. (1999) *Time to Think: Listening to ignite the human mind*. London: Cassell.
- Knowles, Z., Tyler, G., Gilbourne, D. and Eubank, M. (2006) 'Reflecting on reflection: Exploring the practice of sports coaching graduates', *Reflective Practice*, 7(2), pp.163-179. DOI: [10.1080/14623940600688423](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940600688423).
- McPeck, J. (1981) *Critical thinking in education*. London: Palgrave. DOI: [10.4324/9781315463698](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315463698).
- Mezirow, J. (2000) *Learning as transformation: Critical Perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- O'Broin, A. and Palmer, S. (2008) 'Reappraising the coach-client relationship: The unassuming change agent in coaching', in Palmer, S. and Whybrow, A. (eds.) *Handbook of coaching psychology: A guide for practitioners*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis, pp.295-324.
- Price, A. (2004) 'Encouraging reflection and critical thinking in practice', *Nursing Standard*, 18(47), pp.46-52.
- Schwan, J. (1997) *Gender power and the environmental movement: A critique and model for change*. The University of Montana. Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10238&context=etd>.
- Stout-Rostron, S. (2009) 'The global initiatives in the coaching field', *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), pp.76-85. DOI: [10.1080/17521880902781722](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521880902781722).
- Stout-Rostron, S. (2019) *Transformational Coaching to Lead Culturally Diverse Teams*. Abingdon: Routledge. DOI: [10.4324/9780429465741](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429465741).
- Turner, E. and Hawkins, P. (2016) 'Coming of age: the development of coaching supervision 2006-2014', *Coaching at Work*, 11(1), pp.30-35. Available at: <https://www.coaching-at-work.com/2016/03/08/coming-of-age-the-development-of-coaching-supervision-2006-2014/>.
- Walker, S. and Diaz, L. (2003) 'Promoting Critical Thinking in the Classroom', *Athletic Therapy Today*, 8(5), pp.64-65.
- Walsh, I., Holton, J., Bailyn, L. and et al, (2015) 'What Grounded Theory Is ... A Critically Reflective Conversation Among Scholars', *Organizational Research Methods*, 18(4). DOI: [10.1177/1094428114565028](https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428114565028).
- Wasylyshyn, K.M. (2003) 'Executive coaching: an outcome study', *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 55(2), pp.94-106.
- Willig, C. (2013) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (3rd edn.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.