Personalised student support: helping your students achieve their potential

1. Introduction

Our University is refocusing the undergraduate curriculum for September 2012, with the intention that all courses will be underpinned by nine course design principles. One of these is Personalised Student Support. As course teams, you are asked to consider how you can incorporate personalised academic and pastoral support into your courses and how students can be supported to achieve the graduate attributes of employability, global outlook and enterprise.

The JISC-funded Personalised Curriculum Creation through Coaching (PC3) project has been exploring using coaching as a way of providing such personalised student support, encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning decisions and helping them to develop effective and independent study patterns. Coaching has been used successfully within personal and professional development planning to help students determine how best to prepare for placement and work experience and to plan their learning. We have found that students find coaching to be effective in supporting their learning and that it helps students take more responsibility for that learning (Wood et al. 2011). In this guide we offer a brief introduction to coaching-style support and highlight some ways in which it can help you to embed personalised student support into your course[1].

2. Personalised Student Support

Before we explore coaching in more detail, let's consider what we mean by personalised student support. The aim of providing personalised student support is to ensure that "students feel they are regarded and supported as individuals on their courses"[2]. Students need to be clear which staff members they can turn to, for help with what, and need to feel that there are individual staff members who know them personally. They also need to know that the learning opportunities that they are offered are appropriate to them, that they are or can be tailored to suit how they learn, and that they have effective support networks to help them in their learning. Ultimately, they need to be enabled to become confident, independent learners, who can reach their full potential. Taking a coaching-style approach can help you to such personalised support for your students.

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[1] The PC3 team can offer staff development support to course teams who are interested in developing the elements described in this guide, into their courses. We are also keen to hear from colleagues who are already doing similar activities, so that these experiences can be shared more widely. The PC3 project is developing an online coaching toolkit, which will offer resources to course teams, students, and individual academics, who want to learn more about using coaching principles to enhance learning. This development is on-going and we encourage you to check http://pc3project.wordpress.com/coaching-resources/ for more information.

[2] Course Development Principles 2011, Leeds Metropolitan University, p13.

Personalised learning support is, of course, not a new idea. It is widely practiced in schools and in further education, where there has been considerable attention to how personalisation of learning can be achieved for children and young adults (for example, see Leadbetter, 2005 and DfES, 2006). Notably, individual coaching and mentoring is an accepted part of this process.

Personalised student support in this context includes the following elements (not an exhaustive list).

- Creating a supportive environment with an ethos in which all individuals are respected and their views are sought.
- Recognising that people learn differently and helping learners to understand how they learn best so that they can be as effective as possible.
- Encouraging responsibility and raising ambition to enable learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to make the informed choices necessary to achieve their individual goals.
- Initiating learning conversations that seek to understand a learner's needs through dialogue with them, including strengths, areas for development and learning choices.
- Providing mentoring and coaching to enable development in an identified area through individual support from a peer or adult.

We can mirror this within higher education, providing our students with personalised support in the following ways:

- Encouraging and enabling students to build supportive, mutually respectful relationships with their tutors and other students, so that they have an effective support network to help them in their learning.
- Ensuring they have access to all the necessary information they need at the appropriate time to enable them to resolve issues as they arise.
- Helping students to understand how they learn best and how they can stretch and flex their preferred learning styles to enhance their effectiveness.
- Providing mechanisms for assessing personal learning goals and encouraging students to become active, confident and independent learners.
- Facilitating conversations about learning, so that students understand how their learning and assessment relates to their own aspirations and goals.
- Providing effective and appropriate support through individual, group and peer coaching as appropriate.

Personalised learning support of this kind is already available in many courses across our university, whether or not it is described as such. Embedding personal tutoring into courses is one mechanism through which personalised student support can be provided, and, as we will see later, it is very possible to incorporate a coaching style into this process, to enhance its effectiveness still further. Many colleagues across our university, including the Teacher Fellows, have extensive experience of successful personal tutoring, some of which is collected in a guide for staff (Race, 2010), which incorporates many elements of coaching and is recommended reading. Indeed some course teams, notably those

in the health and education sectors, already incorporate coaching into their provision as a matter of course, since this is accepted practice in these professions. In addition, the Counselling Service within our university offer one-to-one coaching-style support, as part of the Kick Start programme, for students who are struggling to get their work done. This guide is therefore intended as a complement to these other resources. Its aim is to highlight how adopting a coaching style can enhance personalised student support still further, and to offer ideas as to how you might do this in practice as course teams, whether or not you currently include personal tutoring in your course.

First we will look at the benefits of taking a coaching approach. We will then consider two key ways in which coaching can contribute to personalised student support: by incorporating one-to-one coaching-style conversations between students and staff and by introducing peer coaching between students.

3. The benefits of coaching

The PC3 project has worked with a number of students and staff, on several courses at different levels, exploring both one-to-one coaching by staff of students and peer coaching amongst student groups. Both students and staff report many benefits of engaging in a coaching process. Some of these benefits are highlighted here, drawing on the words of the students and tutors themselves.[3]

Higher quality work:

By using effective questioning, coaching helps to clarify thinking, resulting in clearer, more focused and more usable outcomes.

> I drew up an action plan alone, but when I created plans with the help of my coach I knew my plan was practical and it would work
> (Level M student)

> So they start with one learning outcome … and then they are asked a couple of pertinent questions about it, and maybe they struggle to answer it all or [they] think about it and they remould their ideas and what they come out with at the end of that 5 minutes is … definitely better than what they would otherwise have done… It certainly seems to be of benefit to students … in terms of the quality of what they are producing.
> (Level 5 Tutor)

Clearer goals:

Coaching helps to fine-tune learning goals and objectives as well as to clarify how learning fits with wider career goals.

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[3] The quotes in this section come from Level 5 students, who have engaged in peer coaching, Level M students, who have experienced one-to-one coaching with a member of staff, and from tutors using coaching in their modules.

> ... my coaching partner helped me to make my outcomes SMARTER
> (Level 5 student)

> It helped me gain clarity about personal and career goals and improved my decision-making ability.
> (Level M student)

Improved self-confidence:

Coaching builds self-confidence by helping students move beyond the blocks that may limit their belief in their own abilities.

> It enhanced my self-confidence as it allowed me to believe in myself and realise some of my weaknesses were actually my strengths (and vice versa) and get past personal blind spots.
> (Level M student)

> [Coaching] made me more confident knowing that there was always someone there to [...] listen to problems.
> (Level 5 student)

Increased self-awareness:
Being coached improves self-awareness, allowing clearer recognition of strengths and areas for development.

> I came to realise that I was actually aware of all my weaknesses and with the encouragement of my coaching buddy became perfectly aware of what I needed to change about myself in order to develop. However, without the mentoring of my coaching buddy I wouldn't of asked myself the same questions and would probably not have acknowledged my weaknesses.
> (Level 5 student)

> I certainly feel that it helped me immensely, it allowed me to critically analyse myself and I was able to turn the findings into solutions
> (Level 5 student)

Improved communication skills and awareness of others:
As well as enhancing self-awareness, coaching also improves awareness of others and ability to communicate effectively.

> They can see themselves when they play it back or listen to it back "I asked a really good question there", "my verbal skills are getting better".
> (Level 5 tutor)

> I was also able to build a greater understanding of people and my inter personal relationships improved
> (Level 5 student)

Stronger employability skills:

Coaching is widely used as a management tool and experience of coaching and being coached is therefore beneficial to students in terms of their future employability, giving them a skill that differentiates them in the job market.

> I need to be coached to aid with my education and all round development but also the ability to coach others is a useful tool to aid in developing skills of which I will need to use once employed"
> (Level 5 student)

> They are developing their softer skills, they're developing their management skills
> (Level 5 tutor)

More supported and motivated:

Coaching focuses on the student's needs and agenda and is therefore highly motivating, but also personal, making the student feel that they have the support they need.

> My coach gave me individual attention. I felt coaching offered me one-to-one attention so I felt guided along my chosen path avoiding the pitfalls in the road.
> (Level M student)

> My coaching sessions with [my coach] left me feeling empowered, driven and more specifically guided.
> (Level M student)

> I've often sat at home at night and I can see the coaching taking place. And that engagement has obviously increased because it's not an official timetabled slot for working in … but the students are there late at night doing it. So that engagement has been really useful.
> (Level 5 tutor)

Drawing out skills and capabilities:

Coaching helps students to reach their potential by drawing on their own resourcefulness to resolve issues. This can be of particular benefit to students who may get "lost" in larger group activities.

> The people that you recognise as being a little bit introverted, a little bit shy, sometimes they're actually really some of the better students at doing this… when they are asking questions … they're asking some really probing questions.
> (Level 5 Tutor)

> I believe coaching is a positive method to assist someone in achieving their maximum potential
> (Level 5 student)

4. Changing the conversation: coaching-style support

So how can we go about incorporating coaching into our courses? Coaching is a conversation. Its aim is to help the person who is being coached to change their behaviour in a way that supports their own goals. Used in higher education, a coaching conversation is a supportive and developmental process to help the student reach his or her full potential. At its heart is a mutually agreed and equal relationship that fosters the autonomy, rather than the dependency, of the student. As such it is non-directive: solutions come from the student rather than being provided by the coach. This is a key difference between coaching and more traditional tutoring. The coach does not offer advice or make suggestions, but instead helps the student to explore the issue and the possible options available. Coaching conversations are inherently personalised, as they are driven by the needs of the student, and draw on their individual resources, encouraging them to become reflective learners and to take responsibility for their own learning.

In the PC3 project we have explored two key ways in which coaching can be embedded into courses:
1. One-to-one coaching of students by staff
2. Peer coaching of students by students.

4.1 One-to-one coaching of students by staff

4.1.1 Adopting a coaching-style

You can enhance the support you provide to students by adopting a coaching style in the conversations you have with them, whether formal sessions as a personal tutor or supervisor, or informally within your classes, extra curricular activities or simply when they ask for assistance. So how can you do this? There are five key elements to a successful coaching conversation.

1. Develop Self Awareness
The first stage of coaching is self-awareness. You need to be aware of your expectations, beliefs, and assumptions, and how these might influence the conversation you have with your student. Do you begin a conversation believing you understand what the problem (and possibly the solution) might be? Do you have expectations that the student should behave or respond in a particular way? Do you assume that they *are going* to behave or respond in a particular way? Do you think that there is one best way to achieve something? Do you have beliefs about your student's capabilities or attitudes and how much they can (or can't) achieve?

The student understands best the specific problem they have. Supporting them to find a solution that is specific to that problem and meaningful to them allows them to take ownership of that solution and commit to it. Any of these assumptions or preconceptions can lead you to direct the conversation to the solution you consider appropriate, rather than encouraging the student to find their solution.

2. Build rapport

To be a good coach you need to develop a strong and positive relationship with your student, which requires good rapport. Rapport involves being on the same wavelength as the person you are talking to and can be developed consciously. Pay attention to your student. Make sure you establish eye contact and do not allow yourself to be distracted while you are talking to them. Observe the gestures, facial expressions and posture they adopt. Note the words used. Language is important to rapport and can give a clue to a student's sensory preferences, whether they are mainly visual, auditory or kinaesthetic. A visual student may express themselves with phrases like *"I see what you mean"* or *"I am looking to achieve"*. An auditory student may say *"I hear what you say"* or *"That clicks with me"*. A mainly kinaesthetic student might use language like *"I feel positive about that"* or *"I have a good grasp of that"*.

To strengthen rapport, try mirroring your student's gestures, posture and facial expressions. Adopt the same language preferences that they use. If you do this, they will find it easier to understand what you are saying and their trust in you will increase as a result.

3. Be an active listener

Rogers (2005) identifies three levels of listening. In Level 1 listening you are focused on self, on finding out more information and on what you are going to say next, rather than on what the other person is saying to you. When listening at Level 2 you focus on the other person, concentrating on what is being said rather than on what to ask next, reflecting their language and following their agenda. At Level 3, you do all of Level 2, but you also listen for the real meaning and emotion behind the words being spoken. Coaching conversations should always be at least at Level 2 and should aim to be at Level 3.

Be aware of the barriers that make active listening more difficult. Try to set these aside when you are listening to give yourself space to hear what is being said. Potential barriers include:

> 1. Pre-judging the student or making assumptions about them that will influence how you interpret what they say.
> 2. Listening through the prism of your own "similar" experience, which will lead you to assume that the student's experience is the same as yours.
> 3. Your own feelings. If you feel low or frustrated you are liable to focus on these elements of what is said, whereas if you feel particularly happy you may filter out the negative elements.
> 4. Distractions, such as what you have to do that day or what is going on in your life.

When the student is speaking, don't interrupt. Wait until they stop talking and then leave a pause to be sure they have finished what they want to say. If you think they have more to say, prompt them with questions like *"Can you tell me more about…"*. If, on the other hand, you feel that they are drifting or going off topic, then ask them to pause and try to recap what you have heard, to ensure that you understand them and to bring them back to the topic.

4. Ask effective questions

Your role as a coach is to help the student examine and resolve issues. To do this you need to ask effective questions. Effective questions are precise and oriented towards goals and actions. They move the student forward towards their own solutions rather than leading or making suggestions.

What questions are the most useful as they open up thinking:
- what do you want?
- what is important to you about that?
- what options do you have?
- what can you do next
- what can you learn from that?
- what is stopping you from doing that?

Other effective questions include *how, who* and *when* which focus specifically on action and commitment:
- how would you do that?
- who do you need to talk to?
- when will you do that by?

Where possible, try to avoid asking *why*? *Why* questions can come across as accusatory in tone and may put a student on the defensive. Instead of asking *"why did you do that?",* ask *"what was important to you about that?"*. This also makes it more precise and focused on the student, as they are less likely to answer by referencing other people.

5. Give honest and clear feedback

Coaching-style support does not direct or suggest solutions, but it does challenge the student through providing feedback and reflecting back observations of what has been seen or heard in the conversation. Feedback is intended to move the student forward and may be framed in terms of further questions. Feedback is always aimed at helping the student learn so needs to be timed so that they are ready to receive it. Try to be factual and avoid interpretation: *"I noticed that when you were talking about that, your voice changed"* rather than *"I could see you were angry"*. Maintain focus by asking how what has been said connects to the student's goals.

4.1.2 Structuring conversations

Simply incorporating these five elements into your conversations will make you more effective and the support you provide will be more personalised to the student. However, you may find it useful to use a simple framework to help structure or orientate the conversation. This can help to maintain focus and lead to positive action. A useful framework for this purpose is the *GROW* model (Whitmore, 2002). The model is not strictly linear and the coaching conversation can begin at any of the stages, depending on the situation. The stages of the GROW model are:

> **G**oals. Talk about what your student wants to achieve as an outcome.
> Ensure that each goal is specific and well defined, measurable so they can

tell when it has been achieved, realistic so that it can be completed with the available resource; and owned by the student, so that they have commitment to it.

Reality. Explore where your student is now compared to where they want to be. Again encourage them to be specific and realistic and ask questions that challenge them to really review their situation.

Options. Once your student is clear where they are and where they are trying to get to, you can encourage them to examine the options available. Here is it useful to get them to explore all avenues, even those that may seem less promising initially. What are the pros and cons of each option? What has worked successfully in the past?

What or **W**ay forward. Here you ask your student to identify what are the specific actions required to move forward with the chosen option in order to achieve the goal. The way forward needs to be one that the student can commit to and feel comfortable progressing.

A framework such as GROW can underpin any conversation where the aim is to help a student move forward to resolve a problem, whether a relatively small short term issue or a broader, more significant one. Example questions for each stage of a supervison conversation using GROW are given in Box 1. These can be easily adapted to other contexts.

4.1.3 A question of time

One objection to using coaching to support students is that it is more time-consuming than other approaches. This may be the case if you use a full coaching approach, but by adopting the coaching principles outlined in section 4.1.1, any conversation you have with your student can become a coaching conversation and be incorporated into the normal time allocated for personal tutoring or supervision. If you do this, you will make the conversation personal to each student by focusing on the problem as they see it; you will ensure that the solution reached is owned by the student and is therefore more meaningful to them; and you will help them to learn not only how to solve this particular issue, but how to solve issues in the future.

4.2 Peer coaching of students by students

As an alternative (or in addition) to staff coaching students, introducing peer coaching of students by students can be very beneficial. This can be done across levels (for example, Level 5 or 6 coaching Level 4) or within a cohort. Peer coaching has the benefit of students experiencing both being coached and coaching, allowing them to develop new and valuable transferable skills, which enhance their employability. It can also help build support networks among students, both within and across level boundaries, which can extend beyond the initial context in which they were established.

4.2.1 The Triad Model

A coaching model that has proved to be very successful for peer coaching is the Triad Model. A coaching group comprises three students, who each take a different role in turn: the coach, the coachee and the observer (see Figure 1).

Coach: In the role of coach the student is responsible for asking probing questions, listening to the coachee, challenging their assumptions and giving feedback, but should not offer solutions or give advice. They may follow a structure, such as the GROW model, or may simply ask questions designed to get the coachee to think through the issues and options and move forward to action. The elements of a coaching conversation, discussed in section 4.1.1, apply equally well to student peer coaches.

Coachee: In the role of coachee, the student brings the issue to be considered, agrees to be open and honest in addressing the questions put by the coach and is prepared to take action as a result of the coaching conversation.
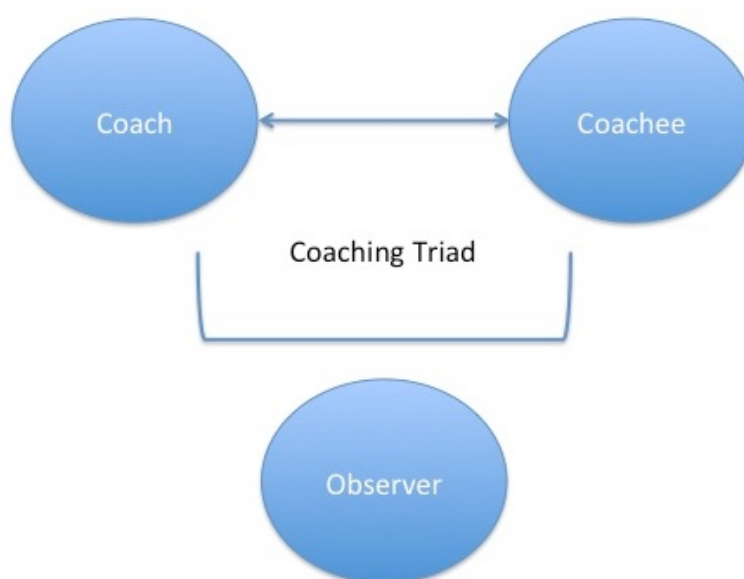
Figure 1: The Triad Model

Observer: In the role of observer, the student watches and listens to the coaching conversation and feeds back to the coach and coachee afterwards. The intention is to provide constructive feedback on what has been said, for example, highlighting points that appeared to be particularly effective or less effective. The observer might point out questions that had moved the coachee forward or points where the coach stepped outside the coaching role and offered advice.

Students are placed in groups of three (or select their own) and take on each of the three roles, in turn. The inclusion of an observer has several functions. Firstly, it maintains a perspective that might be lost if students only worked in pairs, allowing each of them to step outside the intensive roles of coach or coachee and experience the conversation more objectively. Secondly, it provides objective feedback on the process for the coach and coachee. Thirdly, it encourages a more reflective coaching process, enabling all participants to learn from the experience.

4.2.2 Initiating a peer coaching process
Before students can be effective in the peer coaching triads, they need to have a basic understanding of what coaching is and why it is valuable. A useful way to provide this is by demonstration: allowing students to see the difference between a guided or mentored conversation, where help and advice are offered, and a coaching conversation, where the coachee is encouraged to find the solution for themselves. It is helpful is students are able to practice coaching in triads within a class.[4]

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[4] The PC3 project has produced a series of videos to illustrate the difference between coaching, mentoring and tutoring, together with some learning resources explaining coaching and a range of activities to illustrate how the different elements of coaching work. These are available for use with students or staff. See http://pc3project.wordpress.com/coaching-resources/ for more details.

It can be helpful to provide guidance on the scope of the issues that should be covered in peer coaching. In the courses we have worked with, where peer coaching has been used successfully, the students have been given clear guidance on the specific issues to coach. So, for example, students have been asked to coach each other on their placement learning outcomes or on their assessment. Providing something specific will give them a starting point and focus the coaching on academic issues.

As participation is critical to the success of the peer coaching triads, it can also be helpful to embed the peer coaching within the assessment for the course, for example, by asking students to reflect on the process as part of their assessment. This can ensure all students take part, while still preserving privacy within the coaching conversation itself.

5. When to use coaching-style support

We have considered how embedding coaching-style conversation into courses provides students with personalised support. We have examined the coaching conversation in detail and looked at two variations on this: one-to-one coaching of students by staff and peer coaching of students by students in coaching triads. Coaching-style conversations can be used in any situation where your student needs support and can be incorporated as a formal or informal element of your course. We conclude by summarising some of the types of situations in which such conversations can be particularly helpful.

1. Clarify choices that have to be made

A coaching-style conversation can help a student make necessary academic decisions such as what options to select, what kind of placement to undertake, or whether particular volunteering would be beneficial. It can also help students to make decisions about their future career path and how to prepare for this while at university. In these situations, use coaching to clarify what the student wants to achieve and what is important to them before moving on to the specific choice, as this will help ensure that choices are relevant and appropriate.

2. Explore blocks and perceived issues

Sometimes it is a student's belief about themselves and their own abilities that is the issue. If someone believes they cannot do something – or assumes that something bad will happen if they try – then they will need to examine these beliefs and assumptions before they can progress in this area. It may be that they have had a previous bad experience, or that others have told them that they can't do it, or they may be afraid that something will go wrong if they try. Through coaching you can challenge these assumptions. Ask questions to get them to examine the beliefs and assumptions they hold:

- what are you assuming that is stopping you…?
- what would happen if you did that…?
- who is saying you can't…?

Learn to listen for blocks such as these and be prepared to challenge them.

3. Develop action plans for learning

Coaching is very useful to help students develop personalised action plans for learning. The GROW model provides a useful framework for this. The first step is to establish a clear, measurable and realistic goal. Then the student needs to understand where they are now in relation to their goal. The third step is to consider the options available to move the student forward and finally the student needs to commit to action. Action plans can be built forwards from where the student is now towards the goal, or backwards, starting with the goal. In either case, ask the student to envisage a time line between where they are now and where they want to be, and get them to identify the specific steps they would need to take to move from one to the other.

4. Improve or hone work

In an academic context, a valuable use of coaching is to help student improve their work. Asking probing questions encourages the student to look more carefully and objectively at their work and consider how to improve it. These can challenge the assumptions they have made and help them to ensure that their arguments are clear and well constructed. They can encourage them to examine how their work addresses the key criteria and ensure that they have met all the requirements. Going through this process with a coach, whether a member of staff or a peer, can also encourage students to use similar questions when reviewing their work on their own, enabling them to take another step towards becoming a confident, independent learner.

5. Build group cohesion

Coaching is an inherently supportive process. It requires rapport between the coach and coachee and encourages greater self awareness and awareness of others. As such peer coaching is an excellent activity to use to help develop cohesion in a group and an ethos of mutual support. Many of the students we have worked with, who undertook peer coaching on one module, later transferred this to other modules of their own volition. They found the process to be a useful way to work together and support one another and so extended its use beyond that originally envisaged. Peer coaching can therefore be a useful first step to developing a supportive network around your course.

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