

## Fostering Educational Partnerships

How can a coaching contract between students and educators enrich and enhance the educational experience?

In the dynamic landscape of Higher Education, fostering meaningful connections between students and educators is essential for cultivating a thriving learning environment. The development and implementation of a coaching-style contract provides a structured framework to negotiate this relationship and the resulting learning environment and opportunity to reimagine the partnership between students and educators, aiming to enrich and enhance the educational experience for both parties.

### **Contracting for learning**

A coaching contract establishes productive expectations among the parties involved, clarifying the business arrangements, intended outcomes, and methods the coach will be using ([Lee, 2013](#)). This contract establishes a framework conducive to learning by clarifying the parameters, boundaries, behaviours, and goals of the coaching relationship, whilst surfacing any assumptions and expectations.

These principles equally apply in establishing an effective and enriching learning environment in Higher Education, contributing to a holistic and empowering educational experience. They promote the creation of a positive and inclusive culture that celebrates diversity and creates a safe space for all, where individuals feel heard, valued, and respected. Such contracting between educators and students creates an open and transparent environment that is more conducive to learning and establishes clear roles and responsibilities, leading to greater autonomy, and clearer accountability, and thus an empowering educational experience ([Lemieux, 2001](#)).

The literature surrounding student-educator relationships underscores the pivotal role they play in shaping the learning journey and student engagement ([Thornberg et al, 2022](#)). Traditionally, these relationships have been characterised by a unidirectional flow of information, with educators imparting knowledge and students receiving it. However, recent educational paradigms emphasise the importance of collaboration and active engagement, requiring a renegotiation of the student-educator contract. The coaching contract emerges as a promising tool to formalise this shift, empowering individuals to reach their full potential.

### **Shifting perspectives**

Positioning the educator as collaborator and coach, rather than teacher and expert, changes the expectation from teaching to learning, the approach from didactic to dialogic, and shifts responsibility from the educator to the learner. Through my own practice as a coach and coach supervisor, I have developed the attitudes, personal behaviours and social supports that are key to a coaching pedagogy as they underpin sustainable, resilient learning, and support the development of transferable skills, such as problem-solving, self-sufficiency, and collaboration ([Akkerman, 2017](#)).

My contracting with undergraduate and postgraduate students takes the form of an interactive session at the start of the first lecture, in which I share my expectations and invite students to share their hereto covert psychological contract, for them to be shaped as a shared contract that underpins the module, clarifying what each party commits to the relationship and their expectations of what they might receive in return.

The true value is in what is contracted for. I aim to balance power dynamics to foster a sense of equality, and establish attitudes and behaviours that empower learners, enabling them to attain higher order thinking through questioning, reflecting, reasoning, discussing, and arguing (Hardman, 2009). Whilst this approach is typically unexpected, most students respond positively to the invitation and develop a more engaged and engaging approach to their learning in the classroom as they have been given permission to challenge some deep-rooted norms.

### **Beyond the norm**

There are challenges inherent in this approach. In a coaching context, coach and coachee meet as equals and although endeavours to replicate such parity in the classroom may be conceivable, the entrenched influence of the conventional power dynamic often experienced by learners, is likely to inhibit the effectiveness of this approach.

Consequently, a key strategy is the cultivation of an institution-wide coaching culture, aimed at augmenting academic achievement and fostering a uniform student experience. There are also questions regarding scalability of this approach to meet the demands of increasing class sizes, though dialogic approaches “can produce significant gains in cognitive learning as well as social and emotional benefits through more personalised forms of learning.” (Hardman, 2009)

### **Challenging convention**

The implementation of a coaching contract in the student-educator relationship represents a significant step towards fostering a collaborative and empowering educational environment. This approach seeks to challenge extant beliefs and assumptions made by students and educators alike, to redefine traditional classroom dynamics, and promote shared responsibility for learning. While challenges such as power dynamics exist, educators can navigate these hurdles through open communication, clear mutual expectations, and distinct responsibilities.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, contracting presents an opportunity for transforming student-educator relationships into partnerships that empower and inspire. My research is exploring the broader application of this approach, and the benefit it will bring in the classroom and in academic supervision.

### **References**

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