

Book Review

By Daniel Doherty

Coaching and Mentoring: A Critical Text

Author: Simon Western (2012)

London: Sage.

Reviewing this book is not a straightforward task, not least because it is difficult to pin down its intended audience. The author claims it to be aimed at coaching practitioners; at purchasers and providers of coaching; and at educators, academics and trainers. Simon Western describes himself as a ‘scholar-practitioner’ who cohabits both the academy and coaching practice, this positioning thus affording a perspective on both. It is never easy to pull off the feat of ‘researching in/into’ a practice from an insider position where the author is *de facto* at least sympathetic towards the practice itself; while at the same time ‘researching on’ the subject from a detached and often critical perspective. The distinction between the figure and ground of these two fundamentally different approaches is not always clear in this text, though the narrative drive is enough most of the time for this distinction not to matter overly.

We learn that the book is written from three perspectives, including Western’s ‘very broad personal experience of the workplace;’ from his ‘personal experience of a lifetime spent in helping relationships;’ and ‘from a wide range of theoretical perspectives’. He then adds a fourth perspective which is his experience of leading and teaching on international leadership programmes and through consulting and coaching. I am not sure why, but this array of perspectives primed me for direct personal narratives of practice from which insights would be drawn. Instead, what I detect is a magisterial gaze upon both coaching practice and on critical theory as it is applied by Western to coaching. In the first chapter, ‘A critical approach to coaching’, the reader is introduced to a broad theoretical sweep including four frames – ‘emancipation’, ‘depth analysis’, looking awry’ and ‘network analysis’ which the reader is then encouraged to synthesise and apply, as coaches ‘have an imperative to work towards developing an ethical, progressive and emancipatory approach’. This is particularly important, Western suggests, as coaching claims to be a force for good, to help people to become their authentic selves. There are also many commercial benefits to ethical practice. The audience for this ‘critical’ chapter then emerges as comprising the practicing coach who is delivered not only a moral imperative, but is also given a clue as to where monetary gain might be had, where being good is good for business.

This tricky distinction between modes of positioning research between ‘in’ and ‘on’ has prompted reflection on what might be meant by the term ‘scholar-practitioner’ – not least as I am hearing this term in use increasingly not only in coaching circles but also among the emerging cohort of professionals who have gained professional doctorates, including those with doctorates in education. In the coaching field, I notice many claiming scholar-practitioner status. First and foremost, I would include those who have stepped out from coaching practice on either a part-time or full-time basis to research an aspect of their own practice, thereafter to return to practice not only with their status enhanced by the addition of the honorific ‘Dr’ on their business card but also wishing to capitalize upon (even monetise) their considerable investment of time and money in gaining their degree. One product that arises from such motivation is a desire for a ‘book’, the story of the research that not only

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serves a record of their findings but also presents as an elaborate business card (or shelf-ware) to leave behind on client pitches or at subsequent training sessions. Such monographs in my view are implicitly legitimizing current practice and the discourses that underlie it, while publishers seem to be increasingly pressing for such contributions.

By comparison with the scholar practitioners that emerge from practice, there seems little evidence of traffic the other way, where critical academics occasionally step into practice. I would imagine an academically foregrounded scholar-practitioner would be seeking peer reviewed journal publication for recognition rather than instrumental books that speak to training or advancing practice, and professionalisation of the same. It does concern me that some self-styled scholar-practitioners claim to see the 'profession' from every perspective, including the critical perspective, when they are part and parcel of the process of professionalisation which should be a strong focus of dissent for any critical researcher worth their salt. Wrapped up in the professionalisation discourse is, of course, the claim made for a viable 'evidence base', where many of those coming from practice would claim to have the inside track on evidence, while seeming blind to the tendency to confirmation bias implicit in professionalising aspects of practice. When I ask where Western fits on the scholar-practitioner continuum, then he is clearly far more than a one-trick pony keen to exploit a perhaps thin piece of practice research in pursuit of the end of fame and immediate monetary gain. A great deal of scholarship has gone into the creation of this text, and if a criticism were to be leveled then it might be that the scholarship is too rich, too various to the extent of being dizzying, rather than too thin. There is little doubt that Western really enjoys intellectual inquiry, and relishes making leaps between disparate schools of thought.

From an educator's perspective, perhaps more than from an academic point of view, this book has so much to recommend it. So many texts on coaching are authored by neophytes who de-historicise coaching, writing as though coaching were breathed into life sometime in the mid-seventies. Western does not make this error. In fact, he takes us back to pre-modernity then journeys through the course of history finally to arrive at 'post-modern' times. Within this broad scope he traces 'friendship' (and its correlate 'loneliness') as an obvious yet overlooked and important thread that runs throughout the history of human beings, where we instinctively offer each other an opportunity to be listened to and accepted. I was particularly taken by the notion that the popularity/ubiquity of coaching could be explained by fact that current coaching practice merges the 'wounded self' with the 'celebrated self', a container that would allow new-ageism and positive psychology to live alongside therapeutic or pharmacological treatments of the pathologised self. I am not so sure that he is saying that the two approaches coalesce within the wide and leaky social container that is coaching practice, but there are certainly practitioners who would lay claim to be bridging these two worlds. He claims that 'coaching is a hybrid expertise that has adapted brilliantly to the complex and competing demands of contemporary society' (p.10). Whether or not that is true, it would certainly assist practitioners to ask where their approach fell on the continuum between 'wounded' and 'celebrated' selves. Western makes an important distinction here, and coaches who claim to occupy both camps simultaneously might well be advised on whether that coalition is in fact possible without contaminating their practice.

Central to this text is the identification of four discourses running through coaching practice. Of these four discourses, three at least are highly recognizable: the 'Soul Guide', the 'Psy Expert' and the 'Managerial Discourse.' As a business school educator I have found these distinctions invaluable in enlightening student debate as to the nature of coaching, and the many forms in which it presents itself. Coaching shows up in many disguises and this categorisation does much to order and inform such definitional and foundational dialogue,

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while also enlightening the complex overlaps between these categories. I remain less convinced of the discrete identity of the fourth discourse, the emergent category of 'Network Coaching', an elusive systemic approach that defies 'acronym, or teach(ing) of it through techniques tools or specific tools' (p208) - though this category is central to the remainder of the book. As Western conducts the categorical debate within coaching across these paradigms, he demonstrates a distinct preference for the 'Analytic Network' approach, an innovation that Western is now advocating strongly not only in his writing but in his teaching and in his practice.

Beyond this four box categorisation, Western proceeds towards consideration of 'creating a new coaching meta-theory,' journeying beyond micro applications of coaching practice towards an institutional and societal framing of 'how coaching interacts as a collective actor in the social field.' Within this meta-theory he claims that the Network Coach discourse serves an integrative function. The question as to whether coaching has an identity at all is addressed through the identification of a Lacanian 'point de capiton' at the centre of these discourses, where signified and signifier are united. This is a bold claim to say the least, but in mitigation Western does not claim to have unequivocally 'done' this theory, but to have opened it up for exposition and further development.

Having established the need for meta-theory, Western then progresses to consideration of coach education and 'formation,' where education of coaches within and across the four discourses is given clear and in many ways inspiring treatment, refreshingly distinct from the tools and techniques approaches prevalent in so many coach development texts. By way of conclusion, the book takes a strongly normative and polemical turn, pitching for coaching as a force for good within society in addition to fairly unashamedly promoting the virtues of Analytic-Network coaching (A-NC.)

Western aims high in his ambitions for this book. I am not sure if it satisfies all of his multiple audiences, but certainly from the educational and even policy makers' perspectives then this remains a really important contribution. Not many people could have written this book – I certainly could not. It dazzles at times with its multiple perspectives and points of reference as much as it provokes. It will feed and stimulate coaching educators, of that I feel certain. Though a critical text, critical management theorists may feel that Western's spoon is too short. Will this book stir from complacency and fixity many of the practitioners and self-referencing accreditors in the field who seem firmly cemented within the managerial discourse? I can only hope so, but I rather feel they will discount this text for many reasons, not least for its academically based nature; theoretical pretensions; lack of evidence base; and its reaching for a complex, emergent networked future that subverts marketisation on a mass scale.

To what extent then is this a critical text? Hard line labour-process critical management theorists may feel that Western too is contaminated by practice driven realities. But then this book is not for them. The truth is that this text is as much appreciative as it is critical. Across the broad target audience that he has in mind I suspect that Western's aim is directed towards those open-minded coaches in developmental practice or in early stages of researching practice, whom I believe will gain immeasurably from the insights and perspectives that will greatly extend their critical faculties in a way that will serve them an independent life-time.

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Review carried out by:

Dr. Daniel Doherty who currently teaches and researches at Middlesex University Business School, where his work focuses on leadership, coaching and management learning. For the past ten years he has been founder and chair of the Critical Coaching Research Group (www.criticalcoaching.com) which seeks to draw together coaching practitioners and those researching the field in dialogue.

Email: dandoh123@gmail.com

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