



Bringing agency and autonomy back to academics through imaginative coaching

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Introduction

Across recent decades, neoliberalism has catalysed significant changes to public universities in which intensified academic labour burns to meet constantly increasing targets fuelling a highly competitive marketplace, described by Knight (2002) as “massification and marketisation”. Many who are drawn to pursuit of an academic career, do so because they seek a high degree of autonomy and agency in the teaching and research of their field of interest (Rem & Li, 2013). Further, academics who have no desire to be managers are compelled to take on management roles as part of imposed targets (Thomson, 2012). Ryan (2012) observed that neoliberalism, corporatism and managerialism in universities has created “academic zombies”, that is, academics who passively accept imposed target metrics and increased pressure as a practice of resistance and survival. Thus, emphases on externally enforced target meeting actively work to diminish the autonomy and agency of academics sparking internal and external conflicts (Callaghan, 2022). I have experienced these conflicts first hand as an academic across the last fifteen years.

In this paper, I will explore how coaching with its qualities of internally driven personal and professional development can be appealing for academics who value autonomy and agency, as Callaghan (2022) suggested. He notes that coaching offers “space for honest conversations around common challenges”, and “the creation of constructive solutions” through practices of “listening, staying curious and empowering individuals to take responsibility for choices” which align with academic autonomy (p.85). As Stanier (2016) observed, “when you build a coaching habit, you can more easily break out of three vicious circles that plague our workplaces: creating overdependence, getting overwhelmed and becoming disconnected (p.136). Coaching engages with coachees from a premise of:

Assume[d] strength and capability, not weakness, helplessness, or dependence. We [coaches] assume a deep desire to give the best and achieve potential. A co-active conversation has certain beliefs built into it: that every situation has possibilities and people really do have the power of choice (Kimsey-House et al, 2018, p. xvii).

The cultivation of internal motivation and empowerment, through coaching practices of active listening, goal setting, self-reflection and accountability, have potential to “transform the relationship between academic managers and lecturers” (Callaghan, p.91). Though as van Nieuwerburgh (2012) explains it “is important that the need for coaching skills is identified by staff and not imposed by leaders in educational organisations” (p. 37).

To attend to the agency and autonomy of which academics desire, I specifically explore how coaching through story concepts (such as archetypes, motifs, and morals) can creatively stimulate curiosity offering rich opportunities for self-authorship and agency bringing joy like Lynden et al., (2024) propose higher education needs.



Literature Review

To understand how coaching through story concepts may attend to conflicts of academic desire for agency and autonomy in the landscape of managerial demands and competitive metrics, I first will explore what the symbolism of metaphors, motifs, archetypes and morals can offer in coaching, followed by explanations as to how agency and self-authorship come to play through such exploratory work with metaphor, motifs, archetypes, and morals.

Symbolism through metaphors, motifs, archetypes and morals

Cultural stories (folktales, fairy tales, fables, myths) offer humanity sense-making through the potent symbolism of metaphors, archetypes, motifs, and morals. Metaphors, archetypes, motifs, and morals in stories can provide words for experiences which are challenging to communicate verbally, and the use of metaphor is regularly cited as a mechanism for reauthoring in coaching literature (Hall, 2015). Further, coaching is highlighted for its work on sense-making processes that propel genuine and enduring transformations (Sofianos, 2015).

Scholarship of the concept of metaphor, dates back to Aristotle as the transference of meaning from one thing to another to describe the indescribable (Kirby, 1997). Working with metaphors arouse synchronous cognitive, sensory, and visual processes, to elicit an embodied phenomenon (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Such makes them very attractive to bring to coaching to attend to the whole person. Beadle and Papworth's (2024) research on the use of coachee described metaphors on their situation, desired transformation and midway point found that self-authoring metaphors consistently manifest meta-awareness, enable agency for transformation, and situational and personal insight. By viewing their situation symbolically, a new rational reflexivity was acquired which enabled coachees to detach feelings they held about the life challenge in question.

The pressure of built-up emotions was relieved as coachees moved from contractive energy to expansive energy. Through imagining metaphors, coachees were alive with agency in opening possibilities for their situation. The imaginings, wonder and opening of possibilities that metaphors offer was also acknowledged by Battino (2002) and Gonçalves and Craine (1990) to shepherd coachees toward agential transformation. Metaphor processing involves abstraction which also activates parts of the brain linked to insight (Yu, et al. 2019).

In cultural stories, motifs are repeated patterns of imagery, action, sounds, words, or symbols that represent or invoke certain qualities. Their repetition draws our attention to them (Delf & Williams, 2021). A well-known object motif is the glass slipper in Cinderella, symbolising the ostentatiousness of royalty to the point of insane impracticality (Ferguson, 2022). A common motif of action is the quest, which holds great relevance to much of coaching which is oriented to a mission toward a goal. We each come to know many motifs through our encounters with stories, songs, films, television programs and so coachees may draw from them in their coached conversations to describe their situation or imagined destinations. The imagery of motifs can evoke emotions and associated memories and meanings (Bloom, 2020). The role of the coach is to be conscious of the effect of the motif and to hold space.



Story archetypes (or motif characters) are primordial character types, such as hero, sage, warrior or villain. Psychotherapist Carl Jung (1969) argues that archetypes offer “inherited possibilities of ideas” (p.66). Jung proposed that there are archetypes which occur universally (e.g., the child, the mother, the shadow). In coaching, a coachee can draw from “archetypal inner resources to facilitate the construction of preferred narrative identity” (Kerr, 2019, p. 5). By naming archetypes at play in a coachee’s identity can assist in reducing feelings of overwhelm and ease interactions between different selves (Lawrence, 2018).

What I really love about cultural stories are their lessons or morals, as they are not didactic, rather they take you by surprise and slowly settle on you. And they can be different for each of us and different at different times of our lives. As philosopher Hannah Arendt (1970) wrote “storytelling reveals meaning without the error of defining it” (p. 105). Utilising the symbolism of stories is widely applied in mental health and well-being work and narrative coaching and is based on a view of stories as dynamic, ever-changing, and evolving processes toward personal transformation (Kerr et al., 2019).



Agency

Beadle and Papworth (2024) found that when coachees engaged with self-identified metaphors in coaching they experienced a sense of agency expressed through expansive energy. Through individuals self-curating their narrative identity, Cochran and Laub (1994) noticed that they improved their recognition of themselves as active agents in control of their lives, with ability to choose goals and actively direct actions to achieve them. Agency is further sustained by coachees reflecting on what they do in their evolving life story and the choices they experience when contemplating how to respond to life's pressures (Adler, 2012). Through coachee constructed archetypes, they have agency over their self-ascribed identity (archetype). "The narrative agentic self is a protagonist who intentionally sets goals, strives to achieve those goals, overcomes obstacles, and actualizes ideals" (Kerr et al, 2019, p. 5). Agency in plot construction is reflected through ongoing compositional crafting which fashions the coachee's evolving life-story (Polkinghorne, 1996).

Self-authorship

The shift from a coachee being subjective to objective with agency over self and experience, maybe part of the shift from a self-authoring mind to a self-transforming mind (Rant, 2021). Authoring a personal recovery story of overcoming adversity (often framed as a quest) can be an empowering and healing experience for the narrator (Kerr et al, 2019, p. 3). The core "quest" narrative is reflected in the archetypal hero/heroine's journey (Campbell, 1968). Supporting coachees to intentionally imagine and author their many stories which explore their narrative identities to transform from illness narratives into healing ones is undertaken in narrative coaching (Drake, 2010, 2017).

Application of agentially self-authoring metaphors, archetypes, motifs, and morals in coaching

These ideas of agentially self-authoring metaphors, archetypes, motifs, and morals strengthen coaching development to think pedagogically and epistemologically as Drake (2024) opines. This is a move beyond competencies which narrow coaching practices to be more linear, hierarchical, controlled, measurable, and predictable (Garvey, 2016). By exploring a coachee's situation, challenges and desires through self-authored metaphors, archetypes, motifs, and morals, coaches need broad understanding of these symbols across cultures to recognise them at play and support coachees in developing their unique metaphors, rather than assuming what they might signify. Through the coaching process it is more important that the coachee understands their own symbolism, growth and change (Spinelli, et.al., 2010). The coach can do such by asking neutral questions to explore how the coachee defines and sees the metaphors, archetypes, and motifs they may refer to. For the coachee to retain the embodied meaning of their symbols, the coach must "artfully avoid consciously or unconsciously polluting the metaphorical landscape of the coachee" (Manahan-Vaughan & Papworth, 2024, p. 143). The coach can offer a reflective space by embracing a role of blind companion in the coachee's imagined metaphorical landscape seeking descriptions and clarifications which as Manahan-Vaughan and Papworth explain can in turn spark the coachee to see things they had not noticed catalysing transformative shifts and reauthoring elaborations.

Conclusion

In sum, there is extensive literature substantiating the power of utilising metaphors, motifs, archetypes and morals in coaching for personal transformation. There is growing interest and success of cultivating coaching cultures in universities for energised capacity building and well-being enhancement (e.g., see Callaghan, 2022). What I am curious to go onto explore is how imaginative coaching inviting self-authored metaphors, motifs, archetypes and morals can reignite academics' passion, agency and autonomy.

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