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A Hermeneutic Study Investigating the Relationship between Coaching and Adult Learning

Angélique du Toit

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2010

Dedicated in loving memory to

my father, François du Toit,

and his love of knowledge

and learning.

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A work of this size can never be completed without the support and encouragement from others. First of all, I owe a great debt of gratitude to my supervisors, Professors Bob Garvey and David Megginson for their continuous support and challenge throughout the journey. The learning I have gained from them is unquantifiable. I am also grateful for the stream of supportive emails and encouragement I have received throughout from my brother, Eugene du Toit, and his partner, Pieter van Dyk and I thank them for their belief in me.

I have left until last the one person who has to share in the joy and satisfaction of completing this project and that is my long suffering husband, Laurence Davies. He has had to be satisfied with second place many times throughout this journey and I am grateful for his unwavering support and patience. There are many more people who have added their support throughout, family, friends and colleagues and in particular my participants who shared their stories with me. I thank all of you for sharing with me the achievement of one of the most important goals of my life.

Abstract

A HERMENEUTIC STUDY INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COACHING AND ADULT LEARNING

Abstract

The purpose of my research is to investigate whether there is a relationship between coaching and transformative learning within adult learners. I approached the research project with a hermeneutic hunch, based on my experience of adult learners, which suggests that coaching reflects a similar process to that of transformative learning.

I have taken a constructionist stance to my research philosophy and the ontological and epistemological position I assumed is based on the theoretical perspective of hermeneutics. The primary task of hermeneutic philosophy is to ultimately integrate all knowledge of the sciences into personal knowing as it is experienced. As coaching deals very much with the subjective nature of the coachee, I argue that a hermeneutic approach is best suited to gain an understanding of the inner world of the coachee. I drew on sensemaking as described by Weick (1995) as a methodological framework which I go on to argue is also a key component in the coaching process. The influence of sensemaking as a methodology led me to adopt a storytelling approach in making sense of the data I collected as being the most appropriate method. As suggested by Boje (2008) the re-storying I engaged in provide a new and alternative story which is based on collective sensemaking of the individual stories.

Based on the data collected I conclude that there is a strong relationship between adult learning and coaching. Further contribution to knowledge includes perceiving coaching as a sensemaking process co-constructed through the relationship between the coach and coachee. This is demonstrated by a final heuristic which has evolved throughout the research journey.

Angélique du Toit
In submission of the degree of Ph.D.

Contents

Page

Acknowledgements 4

Abstract 6

Contents 8

List of Tables and Figures 14

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction 16

1.2 Background to Research 22

1.3 Policies on Life-Long Learning 24

1.4 Influential Thinkers 25

1.5 Research Philosophy 27

1.6 Methodology and Methods 30

1.7 Justification for Research 32

1.8 Hermeneutic Hunch 34

1.9 Thesis Structure 37

1.10 Limitations of Research 40

Chapter 2 – A Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction 42

2.2 Models and Techniques 46

2.3 The Coaching Relationship 48

2.3.1 Trust 50

2.3.2 The Presence of the Coach 52

2.3.3 The Readiness to be Coached 56

2.4 Performance vs Developmental Coaching 59

2.5 The Psychology of Coaching 62

2.6 Coaching and Organisations 68

2.7 Coaching and Adult Learning 74

2.7.1 Reflective Dialogue and Learning 81

2.7.2 Transformative Learning 83

2.7.3 The Transformative Educator 93

2.7.4 The Requirements for Reflection 97

2.8 Conclusion 102

Chapter 3 – Research Philosophy

3.1 Introduction 108

3.2 Epistemology and Ontology 111

3.3 A Qualitative Approach 115

3.4 Phenomenology and Hermeneutics 118

3.5 The Hermeneutic Circle 126

3.6 Conclusion 130

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Sensemaking as Methodology 132

4.2 The Seven Characteristics of Sensemaking 133

4.2.1 Grounded in Identity Construction 134

4.2.2 Retrospective 135

4.2.3 Enactive of Sensible Environments 137

4.2.4 Social 138

4.2.5 Ongoing 140

4.2.6 Focused on by Extracted Cues 141

4.2.7 Driven by Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy 142

4.3 Sensemaking through Action 144

4.4 The Role of Emotions in Sensemaking 146

4.5 Making Sense through Constructionism 148

4.6 Data Collection 158

4.6.1 Informal Data 160

4.6.2 Interviews 161

4.6.3 Documents 164

4.6.4 Focus Groups 165

4.6.5 Debates and Discussions 166

4.7 Storytelling as Method of Analysis 166

4.8 The Researcher as Narrator 174

4.9 Emergent Themes 176

4.10 Evaluation of Research 181

4.11 Ethical Considerations Using a Narrative Approach 183

4.12 Conclusion 185

Chapter 5 – Data Analysis and Findings

5.1	Introduction	188
5.2	Emergent Themes	189
	Theme 1 – Trust	189
	Theme 2 – Coach as Champion	192
	Theme 3 – Non-Judgemental Challenge	196
	Theme 4 – Sacred Space	202
	Theme 5 – Opportunity for Reflection	207
	Theme 6 – Ownership	217
	Theme 7 – Confidence	221
	Theme 8 – Transformative Learning	225
5.3	The Skilled Learner	235
5.4	Discussions and Conclusions	238

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1	Introduction	245
6.2	The Conclusions Drawn with Rationale	245
	6.2.1 Transformative Learning	245
	Inner Learning	246
	Critical Reflection	247
	Co-Construction	249
	Transformative Educator	250
	Dialogical Communication	252
	6.2.2 Coaching as Sensemaking	255

6.3 Evolving Coaching Heuristic 258

Inputs – Coach 260

The Coaching Process 260

Outputs – Coachee 261

6.4 Concluding Story 262

6.5 Contribution to Knowledge 266

6.6 Perceived Weaknesses 270

6.7 Future Research 272

6.8 Personal Reflections 274

References 278

Appendix 314

List of Figures

Page

Figure 1.1	The Coaching Triangle	36
Figure 3.1	The Hermeneutic Circle	128
Figure 4.1	The Research Journey	152
Figure 4.2	Schedule of Data Collection and Emergent Themes	179
Figure 4.3	Amended Coaching Triangle	183
Figure 6.1	The Coaching Cycle	259

1

Introduction

1. A HERMENEUTIC STUDY INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COACHING AND ADULT LEARNING

1.1 Introduction

Coaching as a developing field, both in terms of theory and practice, is in its infancy and remains an elusive concept according to Brockbank & McGill (2006). There is as yet no clear definitive definition of what constitutes coaching. It has been influenced by a series of ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies each underpinned by different assumptions and offering different definitions of what constitutes coaching (Stewart, *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, each of these definitions places a different emphasis on the directive-vs-facilitative nature of coaching (Stewart, *et al.*, 2008). The growth of coaching and its popularity has been exponential over recent years as suggested by Garvey, *et al.* (2009), with its roots buried in education, psychology, sports coaching and organisational development.

Based on my experience of coaching and an initial understanding of the extant literature, coaching appears to have developed along two parallel paths. One path favours the models and techniques based approach with its assumptions based on the behaviourist tradition. This perspective is particularly evident in executive and management coaching which is dominated by a need to achieve goals and objectives and bring about visible changes in behaviours. However, this approach ignores the unconscious and

cognitive elements which shape the behaviours and performance of individuals. The second path, according to Stober (2006), has its philosophical foundation based in a humanistic psychology with human growth and change at its core. Stober (2006) also suggests that many of the approaches to coaching such as the person-centred approach, therapies such as Gestalt, existentialism and psychotherapy all have their roots in the humanistic perspective. However, this approach is embedded in a therapeutic environment which deals with varying levels of dysfunction and pathology whereas coaching endeavours to work with functional individuals with an emphasis on the future.

Brunner (1998) concurs that coaching takes many forms and suggests that it is also dependent on the context within which it is practiced. The purpose of my thesis is to contribute to the debate on coaching by introducing a third path namely to explore coaching from the perspectives and theories of adult learning. Associating coaching with the theories of adult learning is a relatively unexplored territory. Therefore, the context within which this study takes place is a business school within Higher Education and it explores the role coaching plays in the learning journey of part-time, adult learners.

There appears to be an underlying need to control the emerging profession by various associations, such as the British Psychological Society, European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), the International Coaching

Federation (ICF), CIPD and numerous others for the purpose of establishing standardisation. This is opposed to a postmodernist perspective which suggests that society functions within uncertainty, marked by instabilities (Lyotard, 1979, Stelter, 2009). The need for control is associated with a modernist approach which seeks to break everything up into disciplines and to study each in isolation; a philosophy of separation, whereas postmodernism is about integration and the study of a phenomenon as a whole. This is also apparent in the coaching literature with each discipline, such as psychology, therapy or management and organisational theories laying claim on the ownership of coaching.

Furthermore, the focus of the literature seems to be on external factors such as the inputs, i.e. the models and techniques such as the GROW model or the Co-Active model (Whitmore, 1996; Whitworth, *et al.*, 1998) or the outputs, i.e. performance and achievement of goals and objectives (Downey, 2003; Wilson, 2007; Stelter, 2009). The literature suggests that the power of coaching is attributed to the various tools and techniques. I argue that this is a simplistic perspective of coaching as there appears to be little by way of addressing the stage in between inputs and outputs and its contribution to coaching. As there is an absence in the literature on making this stage explicit, it remains an enigma; a black box which is complex and difficult to define. I endeavour to contribute in making this stage more transparent for the purpose of understanding its significance to the overall coaching experience.

As Stober (2006:18) states, "the humanistic theory of self-actualization is a foundational assumption for coaching with its focus on enhancing growth rather than meliorating dysfunction." This assumption places coaching within the realm of growth and supports an optimistic view of the person being coached. There are numerous claims made as to the outcomes of coaching, which according to Whybrow (2008) includes reducing the experience of stress, improved leadership skills and behavioural change. Whatever the desired outcome sought by either the coach or the coachee, there are a vast array of existing and growing models and techniques claiming to achieve these outcomes. Some of these are discussed in the review of the literature in Chapter 2. Although the humanistic approach is very supportive of the coachee, I would at this stage challenge what appears to be an absence of a critical and sceptical debate of such an approach. Postmodernism, as advocated by Lyotard (1979), encourages scepticism of the motives of institutional authorities with a deep-seated suspicion of metanarratives. As an emerging profession there is clearly a vying for the opportunity to influence and own what would become the metanarrative of coaching as suggested above. This would in turn dictate who practices coaching, in what way, using which techniques and the training and development the coach should receive to practice coaching. On the other hand, postmodernist thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard argue for little narratives and suggests that individuals in society need to make their little narratives heard in challenge of the metanarratives imposed on them by

those in authority. I discuss postmodernism further in Chapter 3 which introduces the underlying philosophy to my research.

There are different perspectives as to how the body of knowledge of coaching should be constructed. There are first and foremost the pragmatists who argue for the acceptance of whatever practice delivers results; the emphasis being on techniques as suggested earlier. As Stelter (2009) points out, the influence from sports coaching and the terms of competition, motivation and top performance are attractive to business leaders who perceive these techniques of equal value in the development of their employees. The pragmatist requires the freedom to blend disparate techniques and approaches together without boundary restrictions. On the other hand there are those well established communities of knowledge with clear theoretical and academic identities and which include the adult learning and development community, psychology, counselling and the study of business (Cavanagh and Palmer, 2009; Cox, 2006; Kemp, 2008, 2009; Palmer, 2008; Stelter, 2009; Whybrow, 2008). The preference of the latter communities is for greater control of the practice and theoretical development of the coaching discourse. The result of such diversity supports my suggestion above that different disciplines and philosophies are competing for the ownership of coaching and the underpinning philosophies, practices and principles that may come to define coaching in the future.

Kemp (2008) posits that despite the popularity that some coaching models may have achieved among practitioners, many make erroneous claims of value, based on evidence which remain unfounded. He goes on to argue that these claims are for the purpose of practitioners to differentiate themselves in an increasingly crowded marketplace. These criticisms are supported by Garvey, *et al.* (2009) who point out that the breadth and quality of available research in coaching remains fragmented and rudimentary. In view of the lack of evidence-based research of coaching, one could ask whether coaching is not as Grant (2007) proposes, merely a more socially acceptable form of therapy, especially within organisations where the revelation of any form of internal conflict may be perceived as a weakness. Stewart, *et al.* (2008) argue that without an overarching coaching model it is difficult to evaluate whether coaching achieves specific effects and outcomes. I suggest that this argument supports the perceived need for a metanarrative of coaching. On the other hand I suggest that the coaching experience will be different from individual to individual with different outcomes, irrespective of the tools and techniques employed.

Barner and Higgins (2007) suggest that it is vital for coaches to understand the specific theory that guides their coaching practice and actions for the purpose of being able to explicitly describe their approach to coaching. This may prevent misunderstanding and a loss of trust between coach and coachee through miscommunication. The authors propose four models that underpin the coaching process, namely the clinical model, behavioural

model, systems model and of particular interest to me, the social constructionist model. This latter model presents possibly the newest and most controversial theoretical model of coaching. From the social constructionist perspective it is through the social interactions and symbolic frameworks within which we interact that our social identities are constructed. In addition, the language we use does not describe an underlying reality, but plays an active role in shaping and framing the reality we come to experience. This perspective is of particular interest to me as it is also the position from which I have approached my research and which Barner and Higgins (2007) suggest offers a different understanding of coaching. Constructionism argues for the inclusion of multiple truths which will allow the integration of different facets of coaching. Boje (1995) refers to it as "plurivocality" which describes the potential for multiple interpretations. However, my initial review of the literature would suggest the shaping of reality would not be achieved through an input model or through the need to achieve measurable outcomes or goals. Instead, constructionism argues for the emphasis on the co-creation between the coach and coachee. The constructionist perspective also poses a challenge to the need for a metanarrative of coaching and whether it is possible.

1.2 Background to Research

I embarked on this research journey some years ago, mainly by accident. As with most people I have multiple identities or as Gergen (1991) describes it,

a pastiche personality, and which includes an identity as a coach and one as an academic. One of my greatest passions throughout my career has been to facilitate the development of the potential I have observed as inherent within the people I have worked with. They included the teams I managed as a manager, students I encountered as an academic or clients I have worked with as a coach. Whatever the environment, I have had the privilege of being part of some rewarding experiences individuals have had on their respective learning journeys in realising their potential. These experiences have led me to believe that coaching is a powerful catalyst in the learning process.

I started experimenting with a coaching approach in support of the peer learning support groups (PLSGS) I had established in a postgraduate programme I managed as part of the postgraduate suite of master degrees. It appeared that a coaching style was powerful in enhancing the learning experience of the students and in particular, the additional support required by international students. I continued with my experimentation and included coaching support on some of the corporate programmes I run on behalf of the Business School of the University of Sunderland. A significant number of the students claimed that the coaching support facilitated the transformation they experienced as part of their learning journey. Following the experiments with the international students, I conducted research into the supportive nature of coaching within the PLSGs and published my findings in an article in 2008.

Encouraged by the outcome I embarked on the much larger research project, which has resulted in this thesis. The purpose of my research is therefore to further investigate the claims made by students that the support of a coaching approach has greatly enriched their learning experience. I will endeavour to establish whether there is a relationship between adult learning and coaching and if coaching is able to inform the transformational process of learning as described in the body of literature on transformative adult learning. Mezirow (1991) argues that a framework for adult learning has to recognise how adults create meaning out of their experiences. Fry, *et al.* (1999) add that one of the most prominent schools of thought as to how learning takes place is that of a constructivist perspective and postulate that it involves transformation. The view of adult learning as the construction of meaning resonates with my philosophical approach discussed throughout.

1.3 Policies on Life-Long Learning

My interest in adult and work based learning coincided with the Government policies on lifelong learning which is aimed at encouraging people to value the acquisition of knowledge and skills as well as the nurturing of creativity, imagination and fostering an enquiring mind. During 2005 there was a major development in the Government's plans to improve the skills base of the UK economy and a number of influential reports followed. Some of these reports contributed to the development of lifelong learning. Among them has been the Fryer Report which sets out to promote a new lifelong learning culture.

A common thread of the various Government papers addresses the poor performance of the UK relative to other EU countries in relation to the level of basic skills among a large section of the workforce. Despite the recognition of the high quality of the UK universities, the low status accorded vocational education and training has led to complaints from employers that many graduates are not appropriately skilled to meet the demands of a 21st century economy. A central tenant of the Government papers is to ensure that employers have access to the skills mix required to support and grow their businesses and that individuals possess appropriate skills to ensure life long employability and personal fulfilment. One of the key targets of the Government is to promote adult learning. Universities, and Business Schools in particular, have responded to the opportunities and offer corporate, executive and work-based programmes specifically aimed at meeting the learning needs of a group of employees and/or organisations. Many see these opportunities as an additional and lucrative income stream and the majority of my students are from this sector and the programmes I run supported by coaching.

1.4 Influential Thinkers

There have been a number of theorists that have had a profound influence on this thesis and who have also shaped my approach to research. These have included David Bohm, theoretical physicist and philosopher, Karl Weick

and his notion of sensemaking, Carl Rogers and his person centred approach to learning, Kenneth Gergen who introduced me to the concepts of social constructionism and postmodernism as outlined by Jacque-François Lyotard and his challenge to a metanarrative of truth. In terms of learning, the ideas of transformative learning as put forward by Jack Mezirow have particularly resonated with me as I believe it goes a long way in explaining the process of coaching. The ideas of these theorists are framed in my own concepts and assumptions about the learning journey of coaching and the collective sensemaking the coach and coachee engage in through dialogue. I am of the belief that it is not coaching if learning is not part of the process, whether that was explicit from the outset or whether it emerged throughout the coaching intervention. I further believe that collectively, as suggested from a constructionist perspective, we are able to learn our way to the answers we need to address the daily challenges we encounter within organisations or life in general.

The central hypothesis of the approach by Carl Rogers could have been written for coaching namely, "Individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes, and self-directed behaviour; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided." (Rogers, 1980:115). He goes on to suggest that three conditions need to be present in any situation where the development of the person is the objective. He identifies the first as the realness or congruence of the

therapist or facilitator. He argues that the more the therapist is herself in the relationship the greater is the likelihood that the client will grow and develop. The theories of transformative learning support the arguments of Rogers and these are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 which reviews the literature on coaching and transformative learning.

The second condition is a climate of acceptance and referred to by Rogers as "unconditional positive regard." It has also been identified as fundamental to the positive experience of coaching by my participants as is the third condition he suggests, namely an empathetic understanding. According to Rogers it leads the therapist or coach to accurately sense the emotions and personal meanings of the client; the liberation of truly being heard referred to earlier. Rogers claims that such sensitive and active listening is a rarity in our lives and argues that it is one of the most powerful forces for change known to him. He suggests that there is mounting research to support that when these facilitative conditions are present, changes in personality and behaviour results. The stories told by my participants would suggest that this reflected their experiences of coaching.

1.5 Research Philosophy

I illustrate the underlying philosophy and approach to my research by recounting a story told by Rogers (1980:249) in what he referred to as a "passionate paper" addressed to psychologists. He equally believed that it

was applicable to members of other helping professions and educators and is of equal value to coaches. He suggests that in educational institutions the intellect is *all* despite the fact that in life we, as humans, learn that feelings are an equally important aspect of living. Rogers goes on to argue that people continue to dichotomise these two aspects of their lives and never are they brought together. This split is also evident within the ontological and epistemological position within research namely positivism on the one hand and constructionism on the other. The position chosen will have a significant influence on the particular approach adopted by the researcher.

Rogers demonstrates this divide with a hypothetical example whereby one psychology student states that for his dissertation he will be measuring the differences between two groups, guided by all the sophisticated precautions available to him, and further suggests that it will be both valuable and intellectually stimulating. On the other hand another psychology student states that for his dissertation he wants to present in the most appropriate form, the most important learning he experienced throughout his graduate years and the deeply insightful self-learning he gained from a difficult client relationship. He describes this relationship as having resulted in mutual growth leading to lasting changes to both his and the client's behaviour. Rogers suggests that the second proposal will probably be summarily rejected. He further argues that many young people find life perplexing and without meaning because they are unaware of the idea that a person of thought can be united with passion and feelings suffused by intellect and

curiosity. The message being that the depth of learning is dependent on both the intellect as well as the emotional experience of the personal journey.

My personal experiences of coaching resonates with the emergent themes identified by my participants who suggest that the unification of emotions and intellect was a fundamental element of the power of their coaching experiences. Furthermore, the majority of my participants suggest that their experiences of coaching were the result of co-creation between them and their coach. This does place a responsibility on both the coach and coachee to be aware of the coaching reality they will co-create. I introduce the notion of the skilled coachee in a later chapter which supports the contribution of the coachee to the coaching process. I also suggest that the coach engages in her own self-reflection for the purpose of understanding the philosophy and assumptions which underpin her coaching. This demonstrates the joint responsibility of both coach and coachee in co-creating the outcome of the coaching relationship. The coaches I interviewed suggested, as in the example given by Rogers, that coaching often leads to mutual benefit. I therefore suggest that this thesis is a result of a journey that includes both emotion and intellect and constructed through interaction with others. The research position I have adopted to guide me on the research journey is that of constructionism and the hermeneutic form of knowing and I support my reasons for doing so in Chapters 3 and 4. Not only is this the research approach I have taken, but constructionism is a significant element of coaching as I have discovered from the stories relayed to me by my

participants.

1.6 Methodology and Methods

I present my methodology in Chapter 4 which is influenced by the work of Karl Weick and his notion of sensemaking. I discuss his seven characteristics of sensemaking and conclude that not only does it provide a research framework, but that it also captures the coaching journey. He perceives sensemaking as the development of ideas which explains possibilities as opposed to a body of knowledge (1995). He suggests that: "...the topic exists in the form of an ongoing conversation". (Weick, 1995:xi). The influence of sensemaking as a methodology led me to adopt a storytelling approach in making sense of the data as being the most appropriate method. The stories we create and construct through ongoing dialogue are a powerful mechanism through which we make sense of our experiences. I retell the stories told by my participants of the coaching experiences they had and which supported them in making sense of their learning journeys. Boje (2008) suggests that the re-storying I engage in may provide a new and alternative story which is based on collective sensemaking of the individual stories.

Bruner (1991) suggests that we constantly construct and reconstruct who we are in order to deal with the situations we find ourselves in and we achieve this through the stories we tell about who and what we are. According to

McAdams (1993) our life stories are what provide us with an identity and give purpose and meaning to our lives. Our stories reveal who we are to ourselves as well as to others. Bruner (1990) asserts that we understand the world in one of two ways. The first being what he defines as the paradigmatic mode and which is concerned with reasoning, logical proof and empirical observations. It seeks to understand cause and effect and determine ways in which reality can be predicted and controlled and identified as the underlying assumptions of modernity discussed earlier.

On the other hand is the narrative mode which concerns itself with human wants and needs, the mode of stories and human intentions. Furthermore, Bruner (2002) suggests that narrative allows us to reinvent yesterday and tomorrow, which challenges the notion of a metanarrative of truth associated with modernity and instead, as put forward by Lyotard (1979), argues for a multiplicity of little narratives. In the narrative mode we attempt to explain events in relation to the way human actors strive to do things over time and what has been referred to earlier as the subjective perspective. Bruner (1990) points out that information or data do not inherently have meaning. Instead, it is through interpretation and the telling of stories that we assign meaning. I too interpreted the meanings of the stories told by my participants in order to put forward a collective story.

As part of my research, I conducted eighteen one-to-one interviews with adult learners who had coaching support as part of their respective

programmes. These programmes included an MA in Coaching for which I am the programme leader and two cohorts from a bespoke programme I designed and delivered to some of our corporate clients within the Business School. Students from both programmes can be identified as adult, work-based learners and a common thread of both programmes is that each student is supported by a number of coaching sessions. The coaching support is provided by qualified, practicing coaches. Students on the MA in Coaching are a combination of coaches seeking to further their knowledge of coaching and gaining accreditation and managers interested in developing a coaching approach to their management and leadership styles. Their interest is also to support an introduction of a coaching culture within their respective organisations. The participants on the corporate programmes are from a range of management positions, from middle to senior management. I also conducted interviews with three of the coaches involved in the work-based programmes to ascertain their perspectives and experiences of coaching within a learning environment. I carried out a longitudinal study with three of the MA students originally interviewed.

1.7 Justification for the Research

It is clear from the literature that coaching has changed exponentially over the last twenty years and its initial association with sports or business executives. As with any new and emerging field, it is in the process of defining itself, setting boundaries and establishing a discourse of the subject.

It also means that there is limited research available on coaching. This research is therefore to add an additional voice to the debate for the purpose of enhancing our understanding of coaching; what it is, equally what it is not, the potential benefit to recipients of coaching and where and how it may support personal development. A further purpose is also to challenge the desire and need for establishing a metanarrative of coaching.

As the literature suggests, there is much emphasis on the inputs and outputs of coaching and the ability to make these visible and measurable. However, my interest is in understanding the process in between and why and how the inputs will lead to the outputs. The purpose of my research is therefore to gain a greater understanding of the 'black box' referred to earlier and to allow the stories of my respondents to reveal which of the competing discourses of coaching is best placed to describe the coaching experience with a learning environment. I am conscious of the need to identify a specific research question(s) as is normally expected of a research project of this kind. On the other hand my research position also suggests that there is no universal truth awaiting discovery. However, influenced by my hermeneutic hunch discussed below, I suggest the following research question as an initial guide to my research journey.

Does coaching accelerate transformative learning within adult learners?

In order to address this question, the following sub questions will also need

answering:

- How is coaching defined?
- What are the theories and assumptions of transformative learning?
- Is there synergy between coaching and adult learning that could enhance transformative learning within adult learners?
- What are the various stages of coaching within the 'black box'?

1.8 The Hermeneutic Hunch

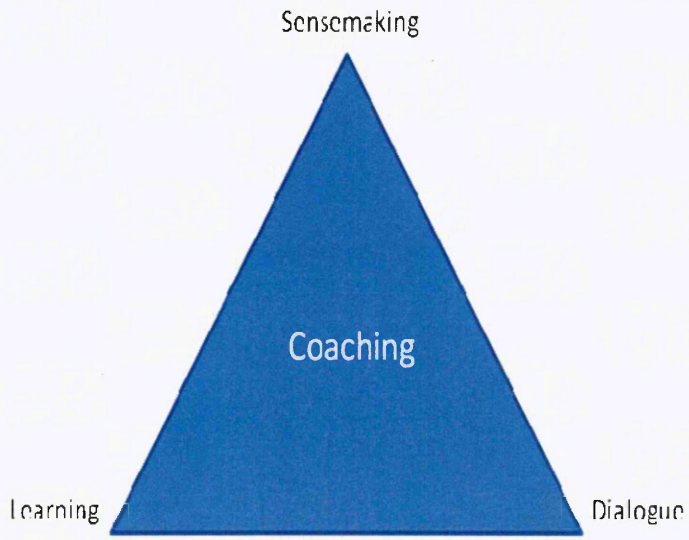
The philosophy which underpins my research approach is that of hermeneutics which I introduce at length in Chapter 3. Deetz (1977) suggests there are numerous philosophical approaches to interpretive research and hermeneutics is one of the most widely accepted approaches. Hermeneutics was originally established as a method of interpreting text and biblical text in particular, allowing the text to speak for itself. In time it became a foundation for human sciences and in particular a method for humanistic studies. Deetz (1977) further suggests that Heidegger took hermeneutics beyond the interpretation of text and culture to integrate all knowledge of the sciences into personal knowing as it is experienced. A hermeneutic perspective perceives the researcher as being immersed in and an acknowledged part of the subject of study. The researcher is expected to approach the research activity with an intellectual pre-understanding or hunch. The hermeneutic approach is depicted as a circle which allows the

researcher to delve deeper into an understanding of the whole by alternating between the parts and the whole, which eventually leads to a deeper understanding of both the parts and the whole (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

Based on my experiences of coaching and prior research conducted and described above, my initial hunch is that the 'black box' of coaching is a sensemaking process which is dependent on dialogue between the coach and coachee and which leads to transformative learning. This is supported by Garvey, *et al.* (2009) who suggest that the coaching conversation is another vehicle for meaningful dialogue, providing a powerful opportunity for learning. Deering and Murphy (1998) identify dialogue as a means of conversation that allows the many voices and disparate views to be heard. Bohm (1996) posits that it is only through dialogue that we can engage in the inquiry and reflection which precedes transformation as dialogue allows us to become observers of our own thinking. Through dialogue we support each other in becoming aware of the incoherence within our own thoughts. Dialogue allows us to transcend individual understanding and Bohm is of the opinion that it is only through collective learning that we are able to realise the potential of human intelligence. He describes dialogue as a 'stream of meaning' that flows among and through the participants as well as between them, out of which new, shared meaning emerges. Included in my initial hermeneutic hunch are the assumptions of adult learning referred to above, which suggests that learning takes place through construction, with

the potential of leading to transformation within the individual learner. My initial hunch is therefore to define the black box as a triangle with interacting elements and which converts the inputs of coaching to identifiable outcomes.

The Coaching Triangle – Figure 1.1



There is a well established discourse of adult learning, which continues to explore the ways in which adult learners learn and how to enhance the process, supported by literature from psychology to education and discussed at length in Chapter 2. There are many different definitions of learning with traditional academic learning emphasising the mental processes whereas more progressive ideas assert that learners must also learn through doing. The latter also argues for the inclusion of emotions in learning (Brockbank and McGill, 2006). I concur with the interpretation of learning offered by

Dixon (1999) who perceives it as 'sensemaking'. Boje (2008) identifies sensemaking as complex and diverse and suggests than an individual can at any one time make sense of many aspects and roles of themselves through interaction with others, whilst at the same time transcending different time frames. Boje (2008) also suggests that whichever door the person chooses to enter at a given time will be accompanied by emotion, an expectation of transformative learning and also identified by my participants as part of their respective learning journeys.

1.9 Thesis Structure

Writing Style

In order to avoid the sensitivities associated with using the universal pronoun and the predominantly male form of address and the argument that it excludes women, I followed the advice given by Bell Custom Writing and applied my own gender throughout for the purpose of consistency.

Structure

The linearity of words places a restriction on the telling of the overall story and which includes the contribution of a multiplicity of stories. I have not found the perfect solution and I have therefore endeavoured to do justice to the stories through the following structure.

Chapter 1 – Introduction. This chapter sets the scene and gives the reader a sense of the journey I have been on and what to expect in the following chapters. I also signpost the main theories which have influenced the approach I have taken to my research and introduce my initial hunch of coaching as a sensemaking process achieved through dialogue which leads to transformative learning.

Chapter 2 – A Review of the Literature. As Garvey, *et al.* (2009) identified, being an emergent field of practice, research of coaching is at present rudimentary. This chapter offers a summary of my view on the coaching literature and identifying the different perspectives and practices of coaching. There are numerous bodies of knowledge and communities of practice influencing and laying claim on the ownership of coaching. There are those who would argue that psychology is deemed to be at the forefront of the development of coaching. The common theme or unifying philosophy amongst the different approaches appears to be a passion for the growth of people, assuming responsibility for choice and nurturing and releasing talent which is associated with a humanistic philosophy.

I also explore the theories of adult learning and transformative learning in particular. In keeping with the overall philosophy of my research, I approach learning from a constructionist perspective which defines it as an act of interpreting experiences and which is constrained by the processes of sensemaking. There are different perspectives as to what constitutes learning

and adult learning in particular is seen as complex and multidimensional, involving an understanding of meaning and self-knowledge gained through critical reflection.

Chapter 3 – Research Philosophy. This chapter introduces and argues for the philosophical approach that underpins my research. I have selected an inductive approach to research supported by a constructionist view of reality, namely that reality is socially constructed. I consider a subjective approach to the subject matter of coaching and learning to be the most suitable approach. I have therefore selected the hermeneutic form of knowing which relies on subjective understanding as a source of knowledge.

Chapter 4 – Methodology. I have chosen sensemaking as a methodological approach and which I propose leads me to narrative and storytelling as the method of analysis. This description of sensemaking is based on the seven characteristics of sensemaking as put forward by Weick (1995). I also include a description of social constructionism as supportive of sensemaking.

This chapter also sets out the methods I have selected in collecting my data and the process I applied in doing so. I have with my research endeavoured to capture the stories told by the participants and in this chapter I discuss the value narrative and storytelling brings to social research. Not only is

storytelling an accepted method in analysing research data, but it is also a powerful tool of the coach.

Chapter 5 – Data Analysis and Findings. I have opted to present the findings of the data grouped in the themes that emerged instead of chronological order. This reflects the non-linear approach of the hermeneutic cycle. I make sense of the data by drawing inspiration from the Tamara metaphor employed by Boje (1995) for the purpose of illustrating the storytelling of organisations. I identify the themes and discuss these in relation to the findings and conclusions I draw and the contribution the themes offer to an understanding of coaching and adult learning.

Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusion. This chapter draws the emergent themes together and support the heuristic of coaching put forward and which has evolved throughout the research journey. This chapter also suggests future opportunities for research which have emerged from the research undertaken.

1.10 Limitations of the Research

As put forward in the introduction, I am particularly interested in deepening my understanding of what transpires in the interim between the inputs and outputs of coaching. The story told by my research is not the definitive story of coaching, but my story.

2

A Review of the Literature

2. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

Montuori (2005) offers an interesting suggestion that a literature review has the potential of being a creative inquiry, involving the researcher in a dialogue with others in that community. As proposed by Montuori (2005) the purpose of this chapter is therefore not only to review the literature on coaching, but also to give me the opportunity to construct my own meaning and interpretation of the current paradigms that underpin coaching. Having done so, it will then allow me to position my research within the context of the known and unknown of coaching. Furthermore, the current assumptions of coaching will provide a framework against which to compare the findings of my research as revealed through the stories told by my respondents. As suggested in the introduction, there are numerous competing discourses claiming ownership of coaching.

I have identified five "major landmarks" (Montuori, 2005:375) in the literature, namely 1) the models and techniques, 2) the coaching relationship 3) performance vs developmental coaching 4) the influence of psychology and 5) organisational and management literature. I discuss these at length in this chapter. My hermeneutic hunch put forward in the introduction suggests that coaching reflects the assumptions which underpin the theories of adult learning. I have therefore included a discussion of adult learning theories for

the purpose of establishing whether a link between transformative learning and coaching has been made in the literature.

Included in my hermeneutic hunch is the perception that the coaching relationship is one of co-construction between the coach and coachee. Stewart, *et al.* (2008) argue that the dynamic and interactive nature of coaching requires a flexible theoretical methodology which would allow coaches to respond with different skills and attitudes in answer to the different needs of different clients. Such flexibility is found within a constructionist perspective and discussed at length in the following section on transformative learning. This belief supports the notion that the coachee is capable of creating a preferred future. Constructionism identifies coaching as a transformative experience in which clients are encouraged and challenged to explore issues from a professional or personal perspective. Whitmore sees coaching as the "midwife of this transformation in the evolution of mankind." (Kauffman, 2008:13). Hargrove (1995) describes transformational coaching as the process which supports the individual to stretch their abilities by altering the context which limits the way they think.

As an emerging discourse there is not a clearly defined body of knowledge which defines coaching. As Downey (2003) suggests, it is evident from the literature that coaching means different things to different people and that each coach will approach coaching with their own preference for a particular style, depending on their personal experience, education and biases. This is

supported by Whybrow (2008) who points out that there is no standardised approach to coaching. Instead, coaches have to adapt their style according to the needs and circumstances of the coachee.

Price (2009) posits that the lack of clarity and difficulty in defining coaching may also lead to a difficulty in identifying the boundaries between coaching and other interventions such as counselling or therapy. The result is that coaches might inadvertently stray into areas and situations they are not equipped to deal with (Nelson and Hogan, 2009). This possible scenario may pose an ethical dilemma for a coach and is an argument for establishing a clear contract with the client from the outset, detailing what will be covered and the nature of the relationship. As a new and unregulated profession, an ethical framework is patchy and unless the coach is a member of one of the coaching associations, it is likely that they would be unaware of any ethical guidelines.

One way of overcoming some of the ethical dilemmas coaching is likely to encounter, is through ongoing development of the coach through supervision. However, Hawkins (2008) found that coaches who engage in regular supervision sessions are by far in the minority. There appears to be an implicit assumption among newly qualified coaches that once they have completed their chosen programme of study that further development and supervision is no longer necessary. This is based on the low numbers of coaches in supervision. Supervision provides invaluable support to the coach

in dealing with possible ethical complexities as referred to above. Passmore and McGoldrick, (2009) propose that supervision is also pivotal in the ongoing development of the professional coach, providing support for the coach to raise their own self-awareness and awareness of their practice.

Bachirova (2007) argues that there is real difficulty in defining the nature of coaching and how one would identify a reputable coach. The lack of evidence-based research of coaching and an overall code of practice leads to criticisms such as posed by Grant (2007) who questions whether coaching is not merely a more socially acceptable form of therapy. Where a coaching practice has its roots embedded in psychology or therapy it is possible that the coaching intervention may more explicitly draw on psychological and therapeutic models as opposed to performance coaching, which would account for criticisms as put forward by Grant (2007). Equally, coaches find it difficult to articulate exactly what coaching is and how they go about it.

Instead, as Askeland (2009) suggests they often turn to the mystical, arguing that it cannot be explained and instead, has to be experienced. On the other hand, Grant (2007) suggests that that the diversity of the profession is both a strength and a liability. I perceive the liability as the lack of agreed processes and procedures. On the other hand, the benefits of the diversity are the flexibility and creativity it affords the coach in responding to the needs of the coachee. Downey (2003) proposes that within any new profession the boundaries and agreed practices will be determined in time. Despite the

diversity, there appears to be common themes or unifying philosophies amongst the different approaches such as a commitment for the growth of people, assuming responsibility for choice and nurturing latent talent, which could be grouped under the humanistic approach. Furthermore, Bluckert (2005b) adds that some practices of coaching tend to focus on the learning and development of the individual with performance improvement, personal growth and change as the output. Lenhardt (2004) proposes that the purpose of coaching is to integrate different approaches for development, contributing to coherence and meaning. A review of the literature suggests that the main elements of coaching can be identified in the following broad themes.

2.2 Models and Techniques

Much of the coaching literature attempts to define it through specific models or techniques associated with different discourses. The preferred discourse of the coach will determine the models and the techniques the coach will draw on. In addition, the skill with which the coach applies the different models and techniques may transcend the scientific knowledge of the particular discourse. This is supported by Chapman *et al.* (2003) who posit that coaching is both a science and an art. According to Kemp (2008), the GROW model attributed to John Whitmore (Whitmore, 1996) is the most widely recognised and adopted model within the coaching community despite the lack of empirical evidence to support its efficacy. There is

consistent critique brought against it due to its simplicity and theoretical flaws and an absence of consistent and reproducible theory to support the practice (Kemp, 2008). I would also argue that favouring one model over others represents a belief in a metanarative of coaching.

Cope (2004) suggests that many of the coaching models and techniques can be placed in one of two camps, namely transference on the one end of the continuum which is based on the assumption of coaching being a process of transference of knowledge, meaning and understanding and therefore not coachee led. (Transference in this instance does not refer to the psychological meaning of transference whereby one person unconsciously redirects feelings onto another individual) On the other end of the continuum is the assumption that coaching is a process of discovery, helping the client to help herself. According to Cope (2004) the coach does not impart any wisdom or knowledge instead their purpose is to bring out the best within the coachee. Coaching is for the purpose of empowering the person being coached in a non-directive way. According to De Haan and Burger (2005) coaching provides the process which enables an individual to reflect on her own actions and thoughts for the purpose of identifying alternative ways of being and behaving. The power of reflection is central to adult and transformative learning as discussed in detail below. As proposed, the perceived value of reflection as part of the learning process could equally apply to coaching.

Irrespective of the particular approach, model or technique the coach employs, it would be apparent from the above that there are varying approaches to coaching, which makes it difficult to measure the value and effectiveness of coaching. It also makes it more difficult to describe what coaching is or is not and therefore justifying its use above that of other intervention practices such as facilitation or training and development practices. The absence of clarity also poses a challenge when it comes to determining the criteria by which one would judge a reputable coach. As suggested in the conclusion, having an overarching framework for coaches to be bound by is an advantage when it comes to regulation and quality assurance. However, the danger is that coaches will focus on the framework and process and lose the creativity and flexibility to draw on tools and techniques appropriate for a particular client with a particular need at the time (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2011). I will return to this debate in subsequent sections. I suggested in the introduction that the coaching literature appears to focus on either the input, i.e. the models and techniques or the output. Identifying coaching merely in terms of a set of models or techniques reduces coaching to a mechanical process.

2.3 The Coaching Relationship

A fundamental aspect of coaching is the quality of the relationship between the coach and coachee. The purpose of the dyadic relationship between the coach and the coachee is to develop the personal performance of the client

(Stober, 2008; Witherspoon and White, 1996). According to Southern (2007) such a relationship is a prerequisite in creating the conditions for transformative learning as discussed below. Southern (2007) continues and suggests that the relationship allows the learner to be challenged as well as supported. Whitworth, *et al.* (1998) describe the coaching relationship as being unique and suggest that the ideal state for the coach to assume is to strive to be without judgement and accepting the coachee exactly for what she is. Unlike other methods of intervention, coaching aspires to resist the temptation to tell people what to do. Instead it is concerned with assisting and facilitating people in their sensemaking activities, supporting them in dealing with and removing the blocks that may be preventing them from moving from one state to another, should they so choose. I question whether the absence of judgement and the emphasis on support may prevent the coach from challenging the assumptions and beliefs of the coachee, resulting in collusion with the coachee in maintaining her status quo. In order for the coach to find a balance between challenge and support I argue that the coach would benefit from the influence of postmodernism introduced in Chapter 1 which is based on a philosophy of scepticism and challenge.

Lenhardt (2004) suggests that it is within the alchemy created between the coach and coachee that the solutions and answers emerge to the questions the coachee brings to the process. O'Broin and Palmer (2007) draw a similarity with the therapeutic relationship which suggests that the maintenance of trust is vital. It is seen as a truism that the successful

outcome of any coaching intervention is dependent on the quality of the relationship between the coach and the coachee (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2007; Maethner, Jansen & Bachmann, 2005; O'Broin and Palmer, 2007). Wycherley and Cox (2008) contribute to the debate on the coaching relationship through an investigation of the selection and matching of executive coaches and highlight the complexity of the coaching relationship. O'Broin and Palmer (2007) suggest that despite the apparent significance of the coaching relationship in achieving a successful outcome, there is very little research available on the subject.

2.3.1 Trust

The person-centred coaching psychologist argues that by accepting the coachee in a non-judgmental and authentic space, she will be self-determining and motivated to achieve her optimal level of functioning (Joseph and Bryant-Jefferies, 2007; Wilson, 2007). Trust as a key element in the quality of the coaching relationship is supported in the coaching literature by numerous authors (Luebbe, 2005; Jones & Spooner, 2006, Whybrow, 2008). Hargrove (1995) concludes that a successful coaching relationship is always a story about transformation and not mere higher levels of performance. However, as discussed in more detail later on, there is a potential dark side to the coaching relationship and its potential for exercising power. As Welman and Bachkirova (2010) point out, there is

inherent within every relationship the potential desire for one party to impose her will on the other. Power can be seductive and Michel Foucault (1988) argues throughout his writings that the misuse of power is the source of most of the evils to be found within society.

The theme of trust is supported by a person centred approach and there is a general acceptance that modern day coaching psychology has its roots in the person centred approach of Carl Rogers (1967) who argues that trust is a vital component in such a relationship. Trust, according to Rogers, allows for an openness and transparency through which a person is able to express their feelings and vulnerabilities and which may ultimately lead to self actualisation. An environment of trust allows the client to express themselves, their ideas and emotions without the fear of judgement or retribution. Rogers (1967) suggests that when the teacher has the ability to understand the student from within and with a sensitive awareness of the way in which the learner experiences the process of learning, the likelihood of significant learning is increased. Cox (2010) raises a noteworthy factor in the coaching relationship, which is often overlooked, namely preparing for the ending of the relationship. Coaching is a short term intervention and as Cox (2010) suggests, once the objectives have been achieved the coaching relationship comes to a conclusion. Cox (2010) goes on to proffer sound advice to coaches suggesting that a good ending is one that is planned for at

the outset and incorporated into the coaching contract, thus avoiding any potential difficulties on the way such as creating a dependency on the coach.

2.3.2 Presence of the Coach

In an attempt to identify the special nature of the relationship, O'Neill (2000) argues that presence is one of the most important principles and tools of coaching. This is supported by others (Brockbank and McGill, 2006; Whybrow, 2008; Kauffman, 2008) who suggest that how the coach 'shows up' in the coaching relationship will determine the perceived value of coaching. Silsbee (2008) concurs and goes on to suggest that the importance of presence within coaching is arguably a key requirement in the effectiveness of the coach to cultivate real and lasting change for the client. Silsbee (2008:21) perceives 'presence' as: "...a state of awareness, in the moment, characterized by the felt experience of timelessness, connectedness, and a larger truth." He argues that being present allows the individual to maximise her resourcefulness and optimises her responsiveness to the circumstances she finds herself in. As will be apparent from the stories shared by my participants and discussed in Chapter 5, the sense of presence and timelessness were of significance to their overall experiencing of coaching.

This space and being in the moment is also reflected in the work of Csikszentmihalyi (2002), proponent of positive psychology and who argues that the attention we bring to a situation and related activity will determine the quality of our experience thereof. He argues that the deep level of concentration or attention we bring to a situation or experience creates a state of flow, leading to a sense of harmony. As suggested by Silsbee (2008), I propose that the intention, attitude and expectations of the coach are paramount in creating such a space. When as coaches we enter that room or the psychological space which is the coaching space, a different set of rules apply. For example, it is important for the coach to strive to set aside her own prejudices and to approach the coachee without judgement. As argued by Kelly (1991) in relationship to the psychotherapy relationship and which equally applies to the coach, in order to achieve the space referred to, the therapist needs to subsume their reality in favour of that of the client for the purpose of understanding the client and her motivations. Some of those rules may be assumed rather than being made explicit, but it is part of a psychological contract. However, before a coach can create that space she needs to have a good relationship with her coachee which reflects mutual respect. In order to keep this space "sacred", it is important that the participants honour and respect those rules.

In their book which explores the creation of a coaching culture, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) refer to the metaphor of an 'energy field' to describe the ability of an organisation to tap into the creativity and capabilities of employees when the energy level in the organisation is high. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) summarises the positive aspects of human experience as a process of total involvement with those experiences which creates the state of flow he refers to and which leads to the achievement of control of our inner lives. Being in the flow is when time stands still for that person and the outside world does not exist as all of their attention and energy is focused on the particular activity they are engaged in.

Another way of identifying the special nature of this space discussed above is to refer to the work of Stern (2004) who focuses on the importance of the therapist in psychotherapy to be with the client in the moment. He describes the 'now' as moments of intensity that may last for only seconds, but these powerful seconds may reveal deep understanding of self to the individual. Through working with the coachee in the here and now, the coachee is able to become aware of deep-seated subjective knowledge, which may fundamentally impact on how she lives her life. In his recent book De Haan (2008) draws on the work of Carlberg (1997) who identifies these moments as 'turning point moments'. De Haan's research attempts to identify the effectiveness of coaching and the

contribution of these 'critical incidents'. As discussed in the section on transformative learning, the discourse of adult transformative learning as defined by Tennant (2005) has much to offer the coach in support of the coachee on her journey of self-discovery.

Whatever we may wish to call these moments, it is clear that the quality of the relationship between the coach and the coachee has to operate at a deep level of trust in order to make these moments possible. The value of such a state is also referred to by Rogers (1980) who suggests that the relationship between therapist and client transcends itself to become something larger and which includes a profound energy of growth and healing. As I suggested in Chapter 1, this thesis sets out to understand what takes place within what can be identified as the 'black box' of coaching. As will be clear from the literature and my own findings discussed in Chapter 5, how the coach and coachee interact within the coaching space, is a significant component of what they identify as the process of coaching.

The space referred to facilitates the capacity to listen deeply which is widely accepted as one of the key ingredients to successful coaching as argued by de Vries *et al.* (2007). Whitworth, *et al.* (1998) identify such listening as not only listening to the words spoken by the coachee, but also what is behind the words and even the spaces in

between the words. They also argue that in order to achieve deep listening, it is necessary to draw on one's intuition. They perceive intuition as an intelligence, which can arguable be developed. Rogers (1980) talks movingly of his experiences with clients both in therapy and also with executives on the power of being heard. He suggests that when he hears not only the words spoken by a client, but her own private and personal meaning, many things happen. Rogers (1980) suggests that it is as though the person once again becomes a human being as someone truly *heard* what it is like to be that person.

2.3.3 The Readiness of the Coachee to be Coached

A further critical factor in the success of the coaching relationship is the readiness of the coachee to be coached (Bachkirova, 2007) and which resonates with the literature of transformative learning proposed by Mezirow (1981). A further aspiration of coaching is that the coaching relationship is one where the coach is absorbed by the coachee without judgement and what it is that makes her tick, what her passions are and providing the tools for learning to enable her to achieve the results that she wants. This is the suggested attitude of the therapist referred to by Kelly (1991) in relation to his postulates of personal construct psychology and referred to on page 32. In order to realise this, Grant (2007) perceives coaching as being a robust and challenging intervention strategy for the purpose of delivering

tangible benefits. However, as a constructionist, I would caution against the motivation and ownership of certain benefits. The perceived value the coachee assigns to coaching may very well be intangible and contradict the benefits of other interested parties such as the organisation and may pose an ethical dilemma for the coach. This is an example of the importance of contracting at the outset of the coaching relationship and the determination of who the client is and how priority is to be assigned to perceived outcomes.

Rogers (1967) also proposes that the educator, or coach, would be much more effective if she was to demonstrate realness or genuineness when entering into a relationship with the learner without front or façade. She should therefore express and communicate the feelings and awareness she experiences, should it be appropriate. It means she may enter into a direct personal encounter with the learner; person-to-person. As Rogers describes, it would mean that she is *being* herself, not denying herself. The challenge and support of coaching is reliant on a sincere curiosity on the part of the coach which according to Whitworth, *et al.* (1998) can lead to some unexpected and significant discoveries. Through curious questioning of the situation of the coachee the coach facilitates the process of self-discovery and learning within the coachee. The power of questioning is discussed later in the chapter in relation to transformative learning and as Mezirow (1990) suggests,

it is through critical questioning and reflective practice that transformation of deep-seated assumptions occur. Transformation has to be preceded by awareness which then opens us the opportunity for different choices leading to changes and transformation of thinking and behaviours.

An overarching assumption of coaching, however, is that the agenda of the intervention is driven by the coachee who therefore has the ultimate say in the outcome of the process (Wilson, 2007). If sustainable change and transformation is to occur, ownership of the outcome has to reside with the coachee. Furthermore, such ownership also prevents any possible dependency the coachee may develop in relation to the coach. An equal partnership of the coaching relationship is also a significant factor of adult learning, as discussed below. Wilson (2007) goes on to suggest that the role of a coach is that of a person who enables the individual to gain self-knowledge with the assumption that this would lead to a more fulfilled personal and professional life. The role of the coach in supporting awareness of self on behalf of the coachee, is congruent with the relationship between the learner and educator as proposed by Mezirow (1990) and discussed in the next section. Stein (2009) suggests that self-awareness leads to self-observation which enables the individual to make different choices in relation to her thoughts and behaviours. A significant expectation of coaching is that self-

awareness within the coached individual is achieved through skilful questioning which helps to surface deep-seated assumptions within the coachee.

From a discussion on the coaching relationship it is apparent that a number of elements contribute to the success of a coaching relationship. It is also evident that whichever models and techniques the coach employees, the coaching relationship is critical to a successful coaching outcome. The emphasis on the relationship and the ability to manage the client is emphasised by de Haan (2008).

2.4 Performance vs Developmental Coaching

Brockbank and McGill (2006) devised a map with which to identify the continuum of coaching based on the objective/subjective dimension, as put forward by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and discussed in Chapter 3 on Research Philosophy. Brockbank and McGill (2006) go on to suggest that coaching is influenced by the philosophy that underpins it and generally the theoretical base is implicit. A subjectivist view assumes that social realities like learning and development are fundamentally different from natural phenomena and can therefore not be captured by objective instruments, which would be the assumption of the objective dimension. Instead, the social world of the coachee is understood to be continuously constructed, reproduced and transformed through interaction with others. The personal

and social world of the client is acknowledged as the basis of the developmental process. This particular style of coaching recognises the socially constructed nature of reality. However, the psychological profession contends that such an approach strengthens the argument for the need of a consistent framework, which would allow for a more transparent and consistent approach.

Within the business community in particular, there is an assumption that coaching seeks to influence and bring about changes in behaviours which will change and improve performance (Wilson, 2007). However, Silsbee (2008) argues that performance coaching has its limitations. He suggests that it is often driven by organisational objectives, which sometimes leads to a tension between the objectives of the organisation and that of the client. It is not always clear cut as to who the client actually is and therefore whose needs come first, which may present the coach with an ethical dilemma and conflicting loyalties. If we look to the caring professions as a model, they perceive the needs and interests of the client to be a priority. It is, however, more complex within an organisational setting where the needs of different stakeholders have to be considered, especially when the organisation often pays the bill of the coach. Silsbee (2008) goes on to suggest that performance coaching can make learning more difficult as the implied standard of performance may create a tension in the perceived performance gap within the client. Silsbee (2008) also suggests that for new skills and competences to be sustained, they need to be grounded in self-awareness and

self-generation. He also puts forward the suggestion that developmental coaching is focused on learning rather than performance, which resonates with the theories of adult learning discussed below.

In essence, Garvey, *et al.* (2009) suggest that coaching is about change. Peterson (2006) is of the same mind and argues that the purpose of coaching is to change behaviour. He shares a second assumption which is that people are complex and cautions that any attempt at reducing complex human behaviour will fail. In order for change to be sustainable, however, it is necessary for the coachee to learn how to coach themselves. The value of coaching is when the coach facilitates the ability within the coachee to self-coach. Developmental coaching is also seen as developing new neural pathways (Rock and Schwartz, 2006), making coaching a biological activity. This idea is discussed further in Chapter 4 on Methodology. Finally, Silsbee (2008) argues that coaching directs attention to learning over time and the iterative process provides opportunities for practice, thereby refining the developmental approach.

Skiffington and Zeus (2003) suggest that coaching supports the way in which we interpret situations, which will in turn influence our behaviours in response to other situations. According to Peltier (2009) understanding the filters through which we interpret and judge events and situations will allow us to have deeper insight to our drivers which will give us more choice in our responses to any given event. If we are therefore able to change our

cognitions we will also be able to bring about changes in our behaviours (Dobson & Block, 1988, Dobson & Dozois, 2001).

As Brockbank and McGill (2006) suggest, making the theoretical base which underpins the coaching practice explicit, will aid the coach in identifying her position on the performance vs developmental continuum. This position will then provide her with the tools and techniques which will inform her practice. This sentiment is supported by Clutterbuck and Megginson, suggested in their chapter to be published in 2011, that it is important for the coach to develop a conceptual framework which will allow them to deal with the complexity of their clients and their environment and drawing on the models which may be appropriate at a particular time.

2.5 The Psychology of Coaching

The theme of psychology and coaching is significant and a review of the coaching literature would be incomplete without it. Psychology has been influential in determining the models, processes and techniques used within the coaching repertoire. As suggested in Chapter 1, Stober (2006) argues that humanistic psychology provides the philosophical foundation for coaching in terms of the values and assumptions which underpins it. Many of the themes of coaching I identify in the literature, particularly the themes from the psychology literature, is therefore based on the humanistic approach. From the humanistic perspective, Stober (2006) argues that

coaches hold their clients accountable for the choices they make and the responsibility associated with those choices. John Whitmore suggests during an interview with Kauffman (2008) that coaching as an industry is better placed than any other to support individuals in working towards taking more responsibility for their lives. It is, however, an accountability that is without blame and judgement. Instead, it supports the coachee in identifying different choices in different circumstances and what they may want to change or do differently in particular areas of their lives. This resonates with the comment by Bluckert (2005a) that the coaching relationship is a fine balance between support and challenge.

Furthermore, Whybrow (2008) puts forward an argument that suggests psychology is deemed to be at the forefront of the development of coaching. This argument is supported by Linley and Harrington (2007) who purport that any of the psychological practices is underpinned by a fundamental and deep seated assumption of human nature. Bluckert (2005b) goes further and argues that coaches need to possess a level of psychological skills and competencies to equip them in dealing effectively across the range of coaching scenarios they are likely to encounter. Bluckert (2005b) also suggests that the term 'psychological-mindedness' has crept into the coaching literature and describes it as the top level competency for executive coaches in particular. Bluckert (2005b) defines it as the ability to go beyond the obvious and to consider the causes and meanings of the behaviour, feelings and thoughts of the coachee. Psychological mindedness can also be

described as self-awareness. As Garvey, *et al.* (2009) point out, exposure to psychological training is not the only route to self-awareness and the various principles of adult-learning also result in a higher sense of self as is evident from the theories of adult learning introduced in the next section.

However, as Thach (2002) suggests due to the need for fast results and outcome achievements, particularly within the context of an organisation, coaching does not necessarily enter too far into the realms of psychology. Hart, *et al.* (2001) purports that there is considerable overlap between coaching, counselling and therapy. According to these authors coaching and therapy shares similar theoretical constructs and practices. The common focus is based on a confidential, one-to-one relationship for the purpose of change. However, in therapy the focus of attention is often on interpersonal health and an identifiable issue such as depression which impacts on the ability of the individual to function. In contrast, as revealed by the literature above, the focus of the coach is on untapped potential of the whole person and seeking to maximise her fulfilment in life and work. Whybrow (2008) also contributes to the argument and suggests that a further contribution of the psychology and therapy professions is an understanding of ethics and boundary management.

Spinelli (2008) challenges the suggestion that psychological models in coaching are motivated by dealing with dysfunctionality. Instead he suggests coaching psychology is grounded in values that support personal

empowerment. This is reinforced by person-centred psychology which argues that the coach is not the expert and that the purpose of coaching is to facilitate the self-determination of the coachee with the ultimate objective of optimal functioning (Joseph and Bryant-Jefferies, 2007). Such an approach suggests that it is irrelevant to distinguish between coaching and therapy as there is not necessarily a theoretical difference between the two. Joseph and Bryant-Jefferies (2007) go further and suggest that it is irrelevant from where the person starts.

However, this may provide the coach with a dilemma of keeping the boundaries between psychology and coaching and when engaged in coaching, not to intervene as a psychologist or therapist. De Haan and Burger (2005:52) suggest that psychotherapy is influential in providing much of the roots that underpin coaching and as introduced earlier, Stober (2006) includes psychotherapy as part of humanistic psychology. This has lead to what De Haan and Burger (2005:52) identify as four distinct approaches to coaching, namely directive coaching which focuses on improvement from the outside. Secondly, is the person-centred approach which attempts to shift the focus internally. The third approach is coaching from an analytical perspective and which is aimed at understanding from the inside and finally there is paradoxical coaching which focuses on upsetting, surprising and manipulating from the outside.

Fundamentally, coaching psychology is seen to enhance development in both the personal and professional life of the individual (Grant and Palmer, 2002; Grant, 2006). This is achieved through the application of well established psychological approaches of behavioural science. de Vries *et al.* (2007) indicates that as with psychology or therapy there is an exploration of the blind spots and defensive routines of the coachee that may lead to distorted thinking. As argued by Whybrow (2008), coaching psychology is based on the assertion that the individual is autonomous and capable of learning and reflective practice. The argument that much of the contemporary models of coaching originate from the humanistic movement of the 60s, and therefore seen as inherently being person centred, is supported by a number of authors (Whybrow, 2008; Linley and Harrington, 2007; Kauffman, 2008).

Behaviourism has had its own influence on coaching and also draws on humanistic aspects which focus on the building of rapport, creating empathy with the coachee and taking a non-judgemental approach to the coachee. Coaching psychology allows the coach to support the coachee to reflect on past experiences and bringing these to conscious awareness (Passmore, 2007). Palmer and Szymanska (2007) introduce a cognitive behavioural approach which suggests that it enables the coachee to achieve realistic goals as well as improve performance. A cognitive approach is also perceived to develop psychological resilience, prevents stress and supports the coachee to overcome barriers to change. It also encourages the individual

to reflect on beliefs which may lead to actions and behaviour which the coachee persists in pursuing despite a negative outcome. It therefore supports a coachee to develop a more balanced perspective to their strengths and weaknesses.

An existential coaching psychology aims to support the coachee in the meanings they create as well as the relations they adopt in the world. Furthermore, according to Spinelli and Horner (2007) an existential approach argues that human experiences are uncertain and therefore always open to novel and unpredictable possibilities. Existentialism shares the arguments put forward by Weick (1979) that humans are essentially meaning-making beings (Spinelli and Horner, 2007). Fundamentally the process of coaching is to support the coachee in their sensemaking activities. Spinelli and Horner (2007) suggest that the individual who benefits the most from an existential approach to coaching is the person in transition. In essence the approach emphasises the nature of being and meaning as opposed to the doing aspect of coaching.

Psychology has a long history of well-established theories and practices for the purpose of understanding human development and behaviour. It is evident from a review of the literature that there is an assumption within the profession that it should take the lead in establishing a meta-model of coaching. This assumption is further supported by the approach of statistical and evidence based research which according to Palmer and Whybrow

(2007) have not yet reached the practice of coaching. However, there is a body of literature imbedded within organisational and management development which suggests that a competency in psychological methods is not enough (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; Bluckert, 2006; Spinelli, 2008). This is explored in the following section.

2.6 Coaching and Organisations

Coaching has its roots in numerous disciplines such as education, psychology, sports coaching and organisational development Garvey, *et al.* (2009). The majority of coaching takes place within an organisational setting with an assumption that the development of the individual will contribute to the development of the organisation. Organisations are also increasingly creating internal coaching capacity through the development of internal coaches. Furthermore, many organisations strive to introduce a coaching culture. I therefore consider the relevance of reviewing coaching in relation to organisations as a fundamental aspect of the review of coaching. Furthermore, all of my participants were students in a business school, seeking to develop their ability to make a contribution within an organisational environment.

Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) argues that a knowledge and awareness of business, business issues and leadership is necessary for a successful outcome of coaching within organisations. Spinelli (2008) adds

that an understanding of organisational and cultural discourses is equally important as also suggested by Clutterbuck and Lane (2004) in relation to situational mentoring. One could argue that as organisations are focused on measurable outcomes that coaching within organisations would be driven by a need for solutions. As suggested earlier, there are those who question the goal-centric view of coaching, Kemp (2008) being among them. Irrespective of the multiplicity of approaches, Brunning (2006) suggests that coaching has become the approach of choice in management and leadership development.

Organisations are perceived as institutions which perpetuate corporate and societal hegemony (Ogbor, 2001) and which are permeated by power. Given the complex nature of relationships within the coaching process (i.e. between coach, organisation and coachee) multiple opportunities exist for the use and abuse of power. For instance, the coach may see themselves as an expert or this exalted status may be conferred upon them by their clients. Either way, the relationship is open to the influence of (perceived) power, which as Linstead (2004) suggests is an enduring aspect of human relationships and which I will return to in subsequent chapters.

Gibb (2008) proposes that coaching allows the client to explore, discover and clarify different ways of leading and developing. One of the reasons for the success of coaching is that it addresses deeply held beliefs and behaviours which inhibit the performance of the manager. The theories of

transformative learning discussed below, has a great deal to offer the coach in supporting individual managers to explore inner beliefs which may act as barriers to personal development. According to Choy (2009) the transformation of the frame of reference held by the adult learner, is of particular value to successfully integrate work related learning, leading to more innovative ways of working. Tennant (2005) goes further and suggests that it creates fundamental change through awareness not only at a personal level, but also relational, institutional and global. As Gibb (2008:173) points out, "There is much in effective executive coaching that is about addressing core beliefs about self and abilities, and experimenting with new ways of being." A theme repeated in most approaches to coaching is the non-judgemental support offered to the coachee, providing the opportunity for reflection on critical issues.

The coachee will often seek help within a coaching environment to bring about changes in behaviours that are interfering with performance such as changes in leadership styles (Ducharme, 2004). The coaching relationship is fairly short-term and arguably delivers high standards and goals. Access to such impartial support is not often available within organisations. Managers do not always have access to open and honest feedback from peers and subordinates. Furthermore, coaching provides the mirror managers need to understand the impact they have on others and how their actions and behaviours are perceived externally. The coach is in the position of being

able to ask the questions no one else in the organisation would necessarily have the courage to ask.

Stober (2008) suggests that much of organisational coaching in recent years has been focused on leadership development. Downey (2003) adds that coaching is important to businesses as it has the ability to reinstate humanity within the workplace. He goes on to suggest that this is achieved when the whole person is given the freedom to express herself; her creativity, imagination, intelligence and pragmatism. Coaching also has the ability to support leaders in growing their emotional and relational capacity (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2007; Kauffman, 2008). Wasylyshyn (2003) argues that emotional competence is increasingly rated as the most important competency to develop en route to senior management positions. Neale *et al.* (2009) assert that the experiential triangle of thoughts, emotions and actions is present in everything we do. de Vries *et al.* (2007) supports the argument that emotions contribute to both our identities and behaviours. He argues that it is a combination of cognition and emotions which determines what we select to focus on or ignore. Wasylyshyn (2003) posits that self-management allows the individual to control and manage disruptive emotions, adaptability, accountability and the recognition of when to act. According to de Vries *et al.* (2007) this self-awareness provides the individual with the tools to manage relationships and situations more effectively.

Continuing the challenge of the behavioural approach represented by the GROW model, Passmore (2007) suggests that it is successful because it is supported by reward and punishment which remains prevalent within organisations. Following a survey conducted by O'Shaughnessy (2001) and his organisation, coaching was perceived as playing a major role in maximising the competitiveness of an organisation. Furthermore, it was also considered as, "the most powerful strategic and tactical weapons open to business today." (O'Shaughnessy, 2001:195). Senior managers tend to be much more outwardly focused, certainly action-oriented and often motivated by power. Introspection does not always feature highly on their list of priorities. de Vries (1989) suggests that it is also a given that operating at the senior level of an organisation can be lonely with few people the senior executive can confide in or even share weaknesses and fears with.

The importance of communication is central within the coaching relationship as well as the wider organisation. Neale *et al.* (2009) suggest that coaching is one of the most powerful ways of communicating and argue that when used affectively it raises self-awareness. According to Quick and Macik-Frey (2004) we can observe two levels of communication within the coaching environment. The first is the functional level whereby the coachee communicates externally throughout the organisation. At this level the manager communicates information and is involved in different external roles. Within the coaching environment the coachee is concerned with communication at the inner tier and which involves a much more personal

and intimate level of communication. It is at this level that the manager is both challenged and given permission to deal with personal complexities, drivers and values which influence her external communication.

Increasingly organisations are seeking to create a coaching culture within their organisations and to establish the coaching capacity through the development of internal coaches. This is a path that will offer advantages, but will also brings with it some challenges. As Wilson (2007) argues some employees will have reservations about being coached by someone else in the organisation due to seniority, confidentiality and reporting structures. The authors with the authority on creating a coaching culture, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) suggest that coaching has the potential of setting the tone of how relationships are managed throughout an organisation. They go on to argue that the case for creating a coaching culture is not going to be the same for every organisation. However, organisations that have to face continuous and oftentimes disruptive change will probably gain the most from establishing a coaching culture. It does require not only investment on the part of the organisation, but commitment from the leadership. In essence, "a coaching culture demands a morally rigorous and humanistic approach to work and relationship." (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005:19).

The significant reference of coaching in relation to organisations suggests that organisations have extensively embraced coaching over recent years. It appears a given for any leadership development programme, change

management or cultural change processes to include the support of coaching. Many organisations have integrated coaching to the extent of developing their internal capacity of coaching. Influenced by a critical perspective, I would question the ability of internal coaching to provide the challenge associated with developmental coaching. This is based on a possible collusion between the coach and the organisational objectives and supported by the writings of Janis (1972) on group-think.

2.7 Coaching and Adult Learning

According to Downey (2003) coaching owes much to the book by Gallwey (1974), "The Inner Game of Tennis" which is seen by some in the profession as being one of the most influential books in recent years on learning and performance. It proposes that the coach works with the capacity of the individual to learn. Downey (2003) therefore suggests that coaching is about facilitating learning and development within another at the workplace and beyond. Kemp (2008) supports the assertion of coaching and learning suggests that coaching provides a process of learning which will support the capacity of the individual to grow. Although there is not a single theory of adult learning, transformative learning theory and critical reflection have been applied to adult learning within the coaching context (Gray, 2006). Joy-Matthews, *et al.* (2004) suggest that learning can be understood as a change in the behaviour of the learner as learning facilitates a modification or addition to existing behaviours.

As Cox (2006) points out, there is very little connection in the academic literature between adult learning and coaching despite the significant synergy between the two discourses. Adult learning is seen as complex and multidimensional, involving an understanding of meaning and self-knowledge gained through critical reflection. Fry, *et al.* (1999) posit that one of the most prominent schools of thought as to how learning takes place is that of constructionism and postulate that it involves transformation. It is also an approach which supports the underlying philosophy of my research, which I draw inspiration from throughout. It also reflects the idea of framing and reframing previous schemata as new experience and allowing new knowledge to be integrated into existing frames of reference. Bruner (1990), one of the most influential constructivists of the last century, puts forward the idea of a spiral curriculum which challenges the student at increasingly higher levels of understanding. He goes on to suggest that ideas such as experiential learning and reflection are rooted in constructivism.

The Social Development Theory of Vygotsky (1978) initially introduced the suggestion that social interaction precedes development and suggests that consciousness and cognition are the end products of socialisation and social behaviour. Recognising the social context of learning where collaboration is valued and knowledge is socially created, encourages movement towards higher stages of learning. The relationship required to nurture critical reflective learning is mutual rather than one-way. Such a relationship is open

to difference and uncertainty and not tied to inflexible outcomes. Brockbank & McGill (1998) argue that it accommodates the questioning of established ideas through dialogue and embraces the value of tacit and personal knowledge within the student learner.

Education continues to be dominated by a view of the teacher as the transmitter of information and which places her in a position of power over that of the learner (Moon, 2006). In contrast, the theory put forward by Vygotsky (1978) promotes a learning environment in which students play an active role in their learning. The result is that teacher and student collaborate in the process of constructing meaning. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and teacher. Continuing with a constructionist philosophy, Mezirow (1991) suggests that learning is not merely adding more knowledge, but instead it is also about the transformation of pre-existing knowledge and which could equally apply to coaching. Put another way Fry, *et al.* (1999) argue that transformative learning leads to a deeper understanding of the subject and a higher order of cognitive development through changes to the underlying schemata which are associated with the subject.

Robotham (2004) adds a pragmatic approach to learning and supports the assertion that effective learning is not only the acquisition of new information, but also the application of the information. He stresses that it is not the quantitative measurement of what the learner knows that is

important, but what the learner is able to do as a result of that knowledge. The debate on learning focuses mainly on the acquisition of knowledge which will influence behaviour. However, a number of proponents of learning argue that learning leads to a relatively permanent change in behaviour, which occurs as a result of the interaction the learner has with her environment (Billett, 2004).

This is supported by Sadler-Smith (2006) who perceives learning as a result of the development of the learner over the longer term and the capacity of the individual to lead a more fulfilling life both personally and professionally. The latter position is associated with a developmental perspective of learning. Senge (1990) goes further and suggests that it is through learning that we re-create ourselves. According to Illeris (2004) learning is defined as a process whereby the individual gains knowledge and skills and possibly also attitudes and opinions. However, in recent years learning has increasingly been seen as a social process which takes place in the interaction between people, resulting in the constructionist view of learning (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985, 1991, 1994).

According to Gray (2001) work-based learning, associated with adult learning, is seen to be focused around reflection on work practices. He goes on to suggest that it is not seen as merely the acquisition of skills, but includes the ability to reflect on experience. The connection between learning and experience was put forward by Dewey (1938) who saw all

humans as having the ability to learn from experience. He also believed that education was a lifelong process; a continuous journey until death. Mezirow (1991) concurs and argues that a framework for adult learning has to include the recognition of how adult learners create meaning out of their experiences and the dynamics involved in adapting these meanings. Holman, *et al.* (1997) go further and suggest that experience is the most important source of learning. We make meaning of these experiences through internal reflection and how they related to our existing knowledge.

Proponents of work-based learning perceive learning as a collective activity. It is argued that learning does not take place in isolation, but through debates and the sharing of problems and solutions. Furthermore, according to Gray (2001), work-based learning requires the development of meta-competence; learning how to learn. It is also a form of learning that relies on experimentation, trial and error. Harrrison (2005) also argues that a crucial aspect of learning is the ability to unlearn. A significant aspect is also the reliance on personal reflection and dialogue and feedback from colleagues. There are, however, critics of work-based learning who suggest that it conceals aspects of power and does not adequately address the question of whose agenda is being served (Easterby-Smith, *et al.*, 1998 and Huzzard, 2004).

Knowles (1980:43) distinguishes adult learning from pre-adult learning and defines it as andragogy, "the art and science of helping adults learn," and

which is in contrast with pedagogy, the art and science of helping children learn. As suggested by Cox (2010) adult learning is underpinned by constructivism whereby learners develop new knowledge based on previous understanding. There are five assumptions underlying the theories of adult learning and which describe the adult learner as someone who (1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning, (2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning, (3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (4) is problem-centred and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (Cox, 2010). I would suggest that the same could apply to the coaching experience.

Brookfield (1995) challenges what he defines as the myths of adult learning which hold that it is inherently joyful, that adults are innately self-directed learners. He strongly argues that research into adult learning should consider the emotional dimensions of learning and how adults learn about their own emotional selves and which are, according to Brookfield (1995), rarely addressed. This is supported by Dirkx (2001) who argue that personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and derived from the emotional, imaginative connection of the adult with the self and with the broader social world. He is adamant that emotions can either impede or provide motivation for learning. This is summarised by Ferrer *et al.* (2005) who posit that holistic educators argue for integral learning which includes all aspects of human dimensions such as body, heart and spirit in

the learning experience. This resonates with the story told by Karl Rogers in Chapter 1. Ferrer, *et al.* (2005) go on to suggest that these elements then combine in co-creating a meaningful learning experience. In addition, Brookfield (1995) argues that we need to understand much more how the meaning making, critical thinking and entering new cognitive and instrumental domains are viscerally experienced processes. Furthermore, he is also of the opinion that adult learning needs to be understood much more as a socially embedded and socially constructed phenomenon. His arguments support the perspective of learning as a socially constructed process argued above.

A significant contribution to the debate on learning is offered by Argyris and Schön (1974) and their identification of double loop learning. As discussed above, Hargrove (1995) perceives transformational coaching as a culmination of learning loops. Double loop learning is the ability to challenge the underlying assumptions of the learner for the purpose of redefinition. This supports the argument of Werner and DeSimone (2005) who suggest that learning leads to a permanent change in behaviour. This resonates with the Social Development Theory of Vygotsky (1978) and the constructionist approach of Bruner (1990) discussed above. Although there are numerous theories on different learning styles, de Haan and Burger (2005) suggest that irrespective of how the individual prefers to learn, that coaching can facilitate learning within any of the learning preferences.

2.7.1 Reflective Dialogue and Learning

Quick and Macik-Frey (2004) suggest that personal development is achieved through deep personal communication and it is through the engagement of reflective dialogue with others that we create the conditions for critical reflective learning. Moon (2006) argues that this process requires a particular kind of relationship between teacher and learners and also among the learners. It requires the ability to suspend a personal need to be right and a willingness to embrace different perspectives for the purpose of learning and developing. Senge (1990) identifies a number of conditions that according to Bohm (1992) is necessary for dialogue to happen. Participants must suspend their assumptions and perceive one another as colleagues requiring a sense of equality and a shared quest for deeper insight and clarity. According to Senge (1990) hierarchy and power are seen as antithetical to dialogue. Finally, there must be a facilitator who is able to hold the context of dialogue; it is not a state achieved by an individual in isolation. These conditions allow for the free flowing of meaning to pass between the learner and facilitator which reflect the constructionist approach to learning.

De Weerdt (1999) suggests that dialogue contains dimensions of exploration. He goes on to challenge goal driven communication and suggests that it is fixed and permeated with hidden agendas and with

an urge to agree on what is "real". Such communication is also subject to control from the fixed positions of the communicators. On the other hand, De Weerdt (1999) argues that within dialogue the communicators relinquish the need for control in favour of "space" and referred to in Chapter 5 which offers an analysis of the data collected. The suggestion that dialogue is a powerful way of making collective sense of our experiences is supported by Dixon (1999) who further suggests that dialogue is the most powerful form of communication through which we are able to reveal our meaning structures to ourselves and others. According to the theories of transformative learning (Jones, 2009) our meaning structures often include distorted thinking. Transformative learning facilitates critical reflection of meaning structures and the opportunity to transform a distorted worldview. According to Ziegler *et al.* (2006) it is through dialogue that adults make meaning and transform their understanding of the world. As Gunnlaugson (2007) and other scholars of transformative learning have pointed out, this requires the spoken, interactive dialogue which allows the individual to reflect and create meaning from their experiences. The literature of transformative learning explicitly embraces the role of dialogue in bringing about a shift in consciousness of the learner.

Within this dialogical space is the rejection of the idea that texts and words can be interpreted in a single, solid and rational way. Instead it

tries to bypass the obvious and sheds light on interpretations that may otherwise have remained hidden. Dixon (1999) argues that this space embraces divergence, multiplicity and possibility rather than the convergence, uniformity and certainty of direction. Furthermore, within dialogue goals do not precede or dominate interaction, but are construed and continuously modified along the way. Bohm (1996) argues that this becomes possible when people create space which facilitates open-ended interaction.

2.7.2 Transformative Learning

During a dialogue between two of the key proponents of transformative learning, Mezirow and Dirkx, they put forward their respective interpretations on the subject (Dirkx, *et al.*, 2007). According to Mezirow it is the application of critical thinking which transforms the frame of reference, or worldview, and its related assumptions which include values and beliefs held by the individual. The process of transformative learning creates the emotional readiness within the learner to bring about a change of her frame of reference. On the other hand, Dirkx (Dirkx, *et al.*, 2007:125) defines transformative learning as "soul work" as he perceives it involving the process whereby the learner explores her own identity, sense of self and her own subjectivity. He goes on to suggest that for him it includes the integration of experiences in the outer world, as well as

experiences of text and subject matter and its impact on the inner world. The latter part of his comment is a reminder of the hermeneutic circle which I discuss at length in the following chapter. Dirkx (2007) argues that the inner aspect of the process is not vague, but instead provides the learner with insight of her engagement, beliefs and expectations of the outer world in which she operates, which is significant to an understanding of the coaching process. One of the criticisms levied against the original conception of transformative learning as put forward by Mezirow (1978) is that it overemphasised rationality. Recently a more holistic interpretation of transformative learning has emerged which provides a more comprehensive account of the discourse (Cranton, 2004; Dirkx, 2007; Gunnlaugson, 2007; Winch and Ingram, 2004).

Gunnlaugson (2007) suggests there remains uncertainty in the transformative literature as to what exactly is transforming. Transformative learning is defined by Winch and Ingram (2004) as inner learning where constructs about self and others are questioned, often resulting in internal struggles between opposing views. They also perceive transformative learning to include emotional energy and impacting on how the individual perceives herself. According to the New Shorter Oxford English dictionary the word 'trans' is described as, across, beyond and into another state or form. Through *transformative* learning the individual is deconstructing their

formative learning for the purpose of constructing a different and possibly more inclusive view of the world. Such learning according to Senge (1990) is the ability to continually clarify and deepen our personal vision by challenging our mental models.

The theories of transformative learning postulated by Mezirow (1991), draws on the corollaries of Kelly (1955) and personal construct psychology for the purpose of understanding how individuals construct meaning. The meaning made of a particular event will guide the expectations of future events and anticipated meanings. Mezirow (1991) argues that adult learning involves values, feelings, ideals and often moral decision making and the exploring of self-concepts. Brockbank and McGill, (2006) suggest that such learning addresses the subjective world of the learner, challenging their taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. Lämsä and Sintonen (2006) add to the debate by suggesting that transformative learning is the process through which the learner transforms meanings hitherto taken for granted and enables the meaning to be reinterpreted in a wider, more open and reflective manner. This is supported by Mezirow (1991) who suggests that people create meaning through their frames of references or assumptions and that transformative learning takes place when those assumptions change, giving a different meaning to previous (or new)

experiences. Mezirow (1981) put forward 10 phases of meaning in the process of transformative learning:

1. A disorientating dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of shame, fear, guilt or anger.
3. A critical assessment of assumptions.
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions.
6. Planning a course of action.
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles.
9. Building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships.
10. Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

Although described in a linear way, I suggest the above phases are experienced in a messy and non-linear way. I also suggest that these phases are evident in the coaching process. The roots of transformative learning as experienced by the adult learner can be traced back to the literature of psychology and philosophy (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1994, 1996). Many of the theories of transformative learning have their roots in the work of Aristotle and more recently

that of Habermas (1971) who identified three domains of learning, namely:

1. The technical – knowledge is governed by technical rules
2. The practical – based on social norms
3. The emancipatory – self-knowledge and self-reflection

Transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (1981) is the ability of the learner to make their assumptions explicit and then to act upon them. Through transformative learning the learner learns to identify the distorted meaning perspectives she may hold in terms of understanding her own motivations and the motivations of others. Mezirow (1971) also suggests that the individual is governed by meaning schemas which provide the rules that dictate her behaviour. These schemas encompass the specific knowledge, values and beliefs, value judgements, feelings and assumptions the learner has about herself, others and the world in general. Transformative learning enables the learner to critically reflect on these schemas for the purpose of deconstructing existing schemas and reconstructing schemas that are more inclusive to allow changes in behaviours.

A fascinating study into the functions of the human brain was made by Rock and Schwartz (2006) who discovered that the brain is capable of significant internal change in response to external change.

As with quantum physics, they discovered that the mental act of focusing stabilises the relevant brain circuits. Therefore the value of focusing is the attention given as it continually reshapes the themes of the brain. Furthermore, cognitive scientists are discovering that the mental maps people hold, i.e. their theories, beliefs, attitudes and expectations play a central role in human perception. People experience what they expect to experience, supporting the notion put forward by Weick (1979) of how people create self-fulfilling prophecies and discussed further in Chapter 4. Rock and Schartz (2006) argue that change in behaviour therefore requires a change in mindset. This supports one of the fundamental assumptions of transformative learning that there has to be a change in mindset which is achieved far more effectively and efficiently through self-observation and which is accompanied by emotion. As discussed in Chapter 2, this challenges the transmission approach to learning.

Mezirow (1997) goes on to suggest that transformative learning develops autonomous thinking; learning to develop the ability to learn. The same assumption is true of coaching and supported by Wilson (2007) who states that one of the core principles of coaching is that of self-responsibility and ownership. Mezirow (1997) further argues that it is possible due to the confidence we develop within the space provided for learning and experimentation. O'Donoghue and Maguire (2005) argue that the lifelong learner needs to master the

process of learning to learn in order to transfer knowledge and skills into new contexts in the future. The goal of transformative learning is for the learner to go within themselves and to reflect critically on the meanings they hold about the world for the purpose of revision (Mezirow, 1991, Cranton, 1994). Mezirow (1991:93) goes on to identify four stages of transformative adult learning:

Learning through meaning schemes – Learning to further differentiate and elaborate the previously acquired meaning schemes that we take for granted, or learning within the structure of our acquired frames of reference. This form of learning includes habitual and stereotypic responses to information received through pre-existing, known categories of meaning. The only thing that changes within a meaning scheme is a specific response.

Learning new meaning schemes – Creating new meanings that are sufficiently consistent and compatible with existing meaning perspectives to complement them by extending their scope. In this form of learning our meaning perspective does not change fundamentally, even though it is extended.

Learning through transformation of meaning schemes – This is learning that involves reflection on assumptions. We find that our specific points of view or beliefs have become dysfunctional and we

experience a growing sense of the inadequacy of our old ways of seeing and understanding meaning. This accretion of transformed meaning schemes can lead to a transformation in meaning perspective.

Learning through perspective transformation – Becoming aware, through reflection and critique, of specific presuppositions upon which a distorted or incomplete meaning perspective is based and then transforming that perspective through a reorganisation of meaning. This is the most significant kind of emancipatory learning. It begins when we encounter experiences, often in an emotionally charged situation, that fail to fit our expectations and consequently lack meaning for us, or we encounter an anomaly that cannot be given coherence either by learning within exiting schemes or by learning new schemes. Illumination comes only through a redefinition of the problem and redefinition in turn is achieved by critically reassessing the assumptions that support the current meaning schemes in question.

Adult and work-based learning resonates with the notion of action learning put forward by Pedler and Burgoyne (2008). They argue that it is best understood as a philosophy rather than a set of techniques. They also suggest that the action learner has to deal with more than just developing technical skills, but also have to consider

issues around values and ethics. Mezirow (1990) concurs and proposes that transformative learning does not happen in isolation and is indeed a social affair that requires interaction, debate, and being exposed to alternative realities. Consistent interaction with others is seen as fundamental to the development of meta-learning (Lizzio and Wilson, 2004). Theorists advocating transformative learning (Gray, 2006; Cranton, 1997; Mezirow, 1994) argue that it is developing an awareness of assumptions held about self and others and more importantly, the ability to critique those premises. The outcome of transformative learning is the emancipation from perceived limited options and which may have acted as a constraining force on the life of the learner. This is perceived of equal importance in coaching and addressed in the review of the coaching literature above. Changes in behaviours are often an outcome of such emancipation. Learning of this nature is only gained through critical self-reflection rather than the technical knowledge acquired through learning. As Tennant (2005) adds the expectation held by proponents of transformative learning is that it goes beyond developing self-knowledge to include a degree of agency and control. In other words, the learner develops self-monitoring, self-control and ultimately personal mastery.

Hargrove (1995:vii) makes the link between transformative learning and transformational coaching by offering a powerful definition of

transformational coaching and suggests that it is, "unleashing the human spirit and helping people learn powerful lessons in personal change as well as expand their capacity for action." Releasing the human spirit is what Hargrove (1995:27) sees as the work of transformational coaching. He describes transformational learning as the culmination of three learning loops, as follows:

- Triple-loop learning: Transforming who people are by creating a shift in people's context or point of view about themselves.
- Double-loop learning: Fundamentally reshaping the underlying patterns of people's thinking and behaviour so that are capable of doing different things.
- Single-loop learning: Helping people embody new skills and capabilities through incremental improvement.

The theories of single and double loop learning were first introduced by Argyris (1976). Giglio and Urban (1998) suggest that the coaching relationship provides the opportunity for a "communal interdependence" and which supports the sensemaking of both coach and coachee. This reflects a constructionist perspective which advocates that there is a multiplicity of ways in which the world may be constructed and made sense of and rejects any attempt at establishing universal first principles. An important distinction is that this relationship is not a telling one, but a learning relationship. The

coach does not impart any wisdom to the coachee, but is there to support the coachee in discovering her own wisdom, as identified on the continuum put forward by Cope (2004) and referred to earlier. The coach supports the coachee in achieving her own wisdom through questioning and the challenge of assumptions.

2.7.3 The Transformative Educator

Pounder (2006) argues quite successfully that transformational teachers possess the same skills as transformational leaders. He goes on to suggest that both have a fundamental belief in profound potential. Furthermore, he also posits that an underlying principal of transformational leadership is that it is a process rather than positional. This makes it more difficult to articulate as it embraces a number of characteristics as opposed to specific duties and roles. A number of proponents of the teacher leader have attempted to identify the properties of the ideal exemplar, namely a sound knowledge of pedagogy or andragogy, research-based knowledge of teaching and learning, effective classroom practices among others (Pounder, 2006; Sherrill, 1999).

Cranton (1994) argues educators who approach learning from a positivist's perspective sees learning as being subject specific and their role as the providers and disseminators of knowledge. On the

other hand, educators who approaches learning from a constructionists perspective perceive learning as transformational and their role as educators responding to the individual needs of the learner. Learning from this perspective is perceived as a process for the express purpose of releasing potential and to transform the learner. Cranton (1994) describes the role of educator in transformative learning as that of facilitator. The educator provides support and encouragement and focusing on the building of trusting relationships of a non-judgemental nature, accepting the learner as they are, including their particular world-view. A further fundamental role of the transformative educator as perceived by Cranton (1994) is that of provocateur, encouraging critical thinking, challenging assumptions and norms and stimulates thinking.

I would argue that transformative educators are lifelong learners themselves. In order to support the learner in engaging in transformative learning, they have to experience the process themselves in order to understand the challenges transformative learning poses the learner. The transformative educator would therefore constantly be engaged in critical thinking and reflection on the assumptions of their practice, themselves and their learners. All of the techniques the educator will employ to facilitate transformative learning is equally applicable to their personal lifelong journey as an educator for the purpose of developing,

updating and deepening her ability to facilitate transformative learning.

Cranton (1996) raises a very interesting debate in terms of the diversity of learners. In applying the psychological type theories of Carl Jung, Cranton argues that awareness of the individual differences are important when educators consider the choice of language they employ to describe the process of transformative learning. This is supported by one of the tenets of personal construct psychology namely that people construe meaning in personal ways (Kelly, 1991; Mezirow, 1991). One could ask what the purpose of transformative learning is. What do the learner and the educator hope to achieve at the end of the process? It could be argued that the educator is not a necessary factor in transformative learning, but as I subscribe to a constructionist approach to learning, I would suggest that the educator is an integral part of the social construction of knowledge as argued extensively above.

The very nature of transformative learning which addresses the psychological, epistemic and sociolinguistic meaning perspectives of the learner raises issues of ethics. The question arises whether the adult educator is engaged in psychotherapy during the process of supporting the learner to challenge their worldviews. Mezirow (1991) makes a helpful distinction between adult learners who are

undergoing life transitions and those with neurotic, psychotic or sociopathic disorders requiring therapy and treatment. Furthermore, Mezirow (1991) argues that there should be no reason why the adult educator should not act as counsellor or instructor to the healthy learner making decisions about life transitions. The same questions are levelled at coaching and put forward in the review of the coaching literature above and the psychological mindedness referred to by Bluckert (2005b). I discussed earlier the perceived need by the psychological community that coaches should have training in psychology or therapy to support the coachee in such decisions.

Mezirow (1991) also acknowledges that engaging in such a process requires knowledge and sensitivity as to the psychological processes, but that this is not classified as therapy. One key distinction between transformative learning and therapy is that the process of transformative learning centres on a specific outcome or purpose, such as career transition or realising and developing personal potential. Critical transformation in higher education is about people who can produce new knowledge and developing a high self-awareness within the student. Mezirow (1991) also suggests that transformation is seen as the process that encourages the learner to become a critical thinker within her discipline. Furthermore, the ability to think critically may also extend to the ability of engaging in

critical thought with her peers and colleagues, recognising the relativity of knowledge.

We can draw parallels between the role of the coach and that of the transformative teacher as described by Pounder (2006) who argues that transformative teachers have a profound belief in potential and which has been identified elsewhere in this Chapter. The views held by Cranton (1994) describing the role of educator in transformative learning perceives the educator as providing support and encouragement. Her focus is on building a trusting relationship of a non-judgemental nature, accepting the learner as they are, including their particular world-view and which is also associated with the coach.

2.7.4 The Requirements for Reflection

According to Brockbank and McGill (2006:56) the key requirements for reflection are dialogue, intention, process, modelling and the notion of personal stance. 'Underlying the capacity for teachers to engage in reflection with learners is the explicit recognition of the interaction as a relationship with learners.' Reflection may be achieved in numerous ways, a learning journal being one example. The need for reflection is supported by a number of theorists who argue that learners need to be able to reflect on their learning (Kolb,

1984; Honey and Mumford, 1992). Other vehicles for reflection include learning logs, diaries, etc. or can be the same as a personal development plan or progress file. Loo and Thorpe (2002) add that a learning journal or diary is not simply a log, but an articulated narrative which follows reflective and critical thinking about specific critical or learning experiences the learner has undergone.

Many other creative ways can be used to facilitate the reflective process, for example the creation of a storyboard which I have successfully used with the Peer Learning Support Groups referred to in Chapter 1. One of the advantages of a learning journal is that it provides the process of arranging and assimilating the new material into the existing structure or the rearranging of the structure to accommodate the new linkages. One of my participants shared the value she got from her learning log as follows:

"One aspect that has been absolutely crucial in this journey has been the keeping of the learning log. It has been incredibly time consuming but I have been quite fastidious in my writing, making sure that I wrote up notes after each coaching session and also keeping my own personal diary. Reading through these notes has helped me keep track of my own development and also reflect upon sessions in order that I can continually

learn from the experiences."

(Tracey)

These forms of learning draw on the power of narrative, which is central to learning. Lämsä and Sintonen (2006) suggest that the role of narrative in learning allows the learner to identify with her experiences and provides a basis for the emotions associated with the experiences. Habermas (1971) perceived the role of reflection as a tool in the development of different forms of human knowledge.

Kolb (1984), a well-known proponent of reflection, came from the traditions of experiential learning and left us with his well-used learning cycle. The Kolb model is a model many would support as being fundamental to adult learning theory. Kolb (1984) proposes a progression through the four stages of the model which facilitates development of understanding, meaning and learning from the experiences of the learner. The first phase is based on awareness of the concrete experience the learner is exposed to, normally as an active participant. The second phase is when the learner reflects deeply upon that experience from her own personal perspective and the possible impact it had on her. The next phase is that of abstract conceptualisation when the learner integrates and generalises the experience for future use. During the final phase the learner assimilates the new learning. Jarvis (1995) offers a critique of the

Kolb model and suggests that the assumption of experiential learning is predominantly based on primary experiences and does not take into account the contribution of secondary experiences.

Based on the work of Kolb, reflection is perceived as the turning of experience into learning. Moon (2006) argues that in order for learning to take place, the whole person needs to be present both cognitively and emotionally. This is a fundamental support of journal writing as it draws on the emotions, bringing them into the open and allows for development, integration and modification. Sadly, as argued by Rogers (1980) in the Introductory Chapter, emotions are lacking in academia which is based on the belief that emotions are untrustworthy and that logic and reason is superior. Historically, education has emphasised cognition, knowledge and content whereas a person-centred approach to learning emphasises emotions for the purpose of tapping into the energy available within the student.

The significance of transformative learning in adults, and therefore its value to coaching as practice and discourse, is offered by Taylor (2007) who proposes that transformative learning theory remains the most discussed and researched body of knowledge on adult learning. He goes on to suggest that it is a discourse which is predominantly focused on adult learning and grounded in human communication, hence the need for exploring the value of dialogue as suggested

above. With the growing international interest in the discourse, Taylor (2007) offers some challenging questions for the researchers of adult learning to consider, for example what new understandings have emerged regarding its essential components. His review emphasises the value of transformative learning in supporting the adult learner to bring about changes in personal paradigms and catalyst for personal change.

On the other hand, Taylor (2007) suggests there remain opportunities to develop greater awareness of the role of context, including other forms of knowing and the importance of relationships. He also challenges, for example, the fact that most of the research on transformative adult learning is dominated by formal educational programmes, including professional and leadership development. The support and critique of transformative adult learning put forward by Taylor (2007) suggests that a partnership of coaching and adult transformative learning would bridge some of the gaps identified by him. Examples are learning within different contexts such as organisations and additional catalysts for transformation as offered by coaching.

2.8 Conclusion

The different themes which emerge from a review of the literature reveal different stories, with different perspectives as to what constitutes coaching. Although there is overlap between the different stories, there is also difference in the emphasis and perceptions. Irrespective of the differences, there is unanimous agreement which suggests coaching cannot be imposed on the individual; they have to be ready to embrace and own the change that results (Thorne, 2004). There is also agreement that the success of coaching is dependent on the dyadic relationship and De Haan and Burger (2005) go on to suggest that learning is reliant on the one-to-one conversation of coaching. This is supported by with Garvey, *et al.* (2009) who consider the non-linear coaching and mentoring conversation to result in deep-seated transformation. De Haan and Burger (2005) suggest these conversations are "rich and full" dealing with issues that are of real importance to the coachee. The focus of the coaching sessions and the conversations are therefore geared towards the future and who it is the coachee wants to become and what they want to achieve.

There are, however, gaps in the literature which fail to address what I consider to be significant facets of the coaching experience. For example, despite the references made to the coaching conversation and the various tools and techniques available to the coach in achieving the quality sought, there is very little reference to dialogue with the exception of two sources

(Brockbank and McGill, 2006; Cox *et al.*, 2010). One of the key differences is the constructive nature of those engaged in dialogue which is not explicit in conversation. The theories of dialogue provide a significant discourse for the coach to deepen her understanding of the quality of the conversation the coach endeavours to achieve, which forms part of the theories of adult learning. Furthermore, there is an absence of an overarching philosophy of coaching with a number of discourses vying for ownership such as psychology, performance and development which has resulted in the vast majority of literature which focuses on tools, techniques and models or outcomes.

Furthermore, although some reference is made to learning as an outcome of coaching in the literature, it is not identified as a key component of the coaching intervention and apart from two theorists (Cox, 2006, 2010; Kemp, 2008), the relationship between coaching and adult learning is not made explicit. Although tentative and not explicitly stated in any significant way in the literature, I draw the conclusion that the ultimate outcome and purpose of coaching is developmental and aimed at facilitating transformative learning. Gibb and Hill (2006) support my conclusion and suggest that coaching has become a significant part of the learning and development discourse.

The review of the literature clearly demonstrates the significant value the discourse of adult transformative learning has to offer coaching. Many of the

elements associated with transformative adult learning and discussed in the literature above, such as the journey of inner learning, are not overtly identified in the coaching literature as part of the coaching process. Furthermore, I make reference throughout the thesis to constructionism and the coaching literature makes no mention of the co-constructive relationship between the coach and coachee. The co-constructive relationship between the educator and learner is, however, associated with the literature on adult transformative learning and seen as one of the key aspects of transformation on the part of the learner. The emergence of learning created between the educator and learner or the coach and coachee challenges the assumptions accompanying the agreement of goals and objectives at the beginning of the coaching relationship and which is associated with performance coaching and identified above. Based on the review of the literature, I am particularly drawn to the learning aspect of coaching and the argument I have put forward in this chapter suggests that coaching is intimately linked with the theories of adult learning. This is succinctly described by Cox (2006:195) as follows:

> *"I would argue, in fact, that androgogy has reached its zenith with the advent of coaching as a learning approach: Knowles' definition of androgogy in 1980 confirms the birthright; the learner is perceived to be a mature, motivated, voluntary, and equal participant in a learning relationship with a facilitator whose role is*

to aid the learner in the achievement of his or her primarily self-determined learning objectives."

It may very well be that the theories of adult learning as suggested by its proponents could provide the emerging profession of coaching with an overarching framework and philosophy without imposing a rigid framework on coaching and which recognises that each learner and learning environment will be different (Brockbank and McGill, 2006; Cox, 2006; Kemp, 2008).

It is apparent that the fledgling profession of coaching remains in a state of flux with no clear boundaries as to what constitutes coaching. We can take comfort from the words of Gibb and Hill (2006) who state that the time of turbulence in the coaching community is no different from any other newly formed profession. It is a period of social construction for the purpose of creating and eventually sustaining the emergent identity of the coaching community. The authors also identify the apparent tension between the need for guidance on practice and techniques and those seeking the underpinning wisdoms and sensemaking to sustain the community. The two groups are represented first of all by those who adhere to the behavioural and performance related aspects of coaching, juxtaposed by the second group of the community who focuses on the learning of the coachee. Time will reveal which paradigm will emerge as the dominant paradigm of the profession.

The next chapter will discuss in greater detail the philosophical approach which underpins my research. My conclusion from the literature is that the constructionist philosophy of adult, transformative learning provides both a framework but also the flexibility for the coach to address and work with the agenda of the client. It is interesting to note how many times various proponents of coaching refer to learning, irrespective of their particular approach or philosophical framework. It would seem that learning is either an implicit or explicit expectation of most approaches to coaching. As will be apparent from Chapter 5, the analyses of the stories provided by my participants reflect the same value of learning as part of the coaching experience.

3

Research Philosophy

3. RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the philosophical context for my research, underpinning the methodological position I have assumed. The chapter will also provide the justification for selecting the particular research paradigm which informs the research project. I will show that I have adopted a constructionist perspective to my research within the hermeneutic tradition which influenced me to select sensemaking as a methodological framework and which is discussed at length in the following chapter. There are two main sections in this chapter. Firstly, there is a discussion on the epistemology and ontology of research in order to determine the position of the research approach, which secondly leads to an analysis of phenomenology and hermeneutics outlining the theoretical approach I have assumed. My approach is phenomenological in the sense that the inquiry I engage in is to explore the particular phenomenon of coaching. Furthermore, the inquiry I have engaged in is hermeneutic as the purpose is to lay open understandings of the essence of the phenomena in the process.

According to Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1991) there are two alternative philosophical paradigms to select from namely a positivist or phenomenological paradigm and I will outline my reason for adopting the latter. Having assumed this position, it resulted in a qualitative approach to

research supported by the argument of Elliott (2005) who suggests that, in order to explain the research data, there are two approaches often thought of as being mutually exclusive. The first being causal explanations associated with the logical and scientific heritage of the natural sciences and secondly, narrative explanations that are embedded in the traditions of literature and history. Elliott (2005) also argues that there is a clear link between a qualitative approach to research and narrative, which leads to the adoption of a hermeneutic approach.

According to Wiklund *et al.*, (2002) as researcher the position I assume in relation to the ontological and epistemological debates on research will determine the methodology I embrace towards my study. Johnson and Clarke (2006) propose that whichever research method I adopt, it will be informed by a particular philosophical commitment. This in turn will reflect my position on truth, human behaviour and what is perceived as social reality. Cilliers (2000) suggests that the quest for knowledge has taken one of two forms. On the one hand is the belief that knowledge can be made objective with thinkers such as Descartes and Habermas often perceived as being responsible for this attitude. This approach is known under different labels which include positivism, modernism, objectivism, rationalism and epistemological fundamentalism. On the other hand is a belief that knowledge can only become known from a personal or cultural-specific perspective and can therefore never become objective or universal. This position is attributed to thinkers such as Kuhn, Rorty, Derrida and Lyotard

and is termed as relativism, idealism, postmodernism and perspectivism. In terms of where I would position myself on the continuum, I argue in this chapter that my research approach is aligned with the latter and is therefore influenced from a postmodernist and constructionist position. A key tenet of a postmodernist and constructionist perspective is the belief in multiplicity of meaning. The notion of multiplicity or little narratives was established by Lyotard (1979) in his challenge of metanarratives to truth which he perceived as being used by authorities in the suppression of different perspectives and ideas.

Although many communities such as scientists, psychologists, sociologists, physicists and chemists generate useful truths, Gergen and Gergen (2008) argue that there is no means by which a transcendent truth can be discovered. This notion has generated strong reactions from the scientific communities including the social sciences that remain wedded to a vision of science generating a truth beyond the community. Morgan and Smircich (1980) argue that as I, the researcher, move along the subjective-objective continuum the nature of knowledge changes and so also my view of the social world. My understanding and preconceptions of the world leading to my values, beliefs and presuppositions play a significant role in determining the position I adopt. As Gadamer (1979) counsels, every act of understanding is influenced and conditioned by its prejudices which as the researcher, I have to be aware of as they will influence my interpretation of the stories told by the interviewees. Crotty (1998) provides a clear route

through the research process offering four elements, namely methods, methodology, theoretical perspective and epistemology. These four elements can alternatively be described as data collection techniques, the strategy behind the techniques, the philosophical stance informing the strategy, and the theory of how we know what we know. To begin the journey I will discuss where on the continuum of truth and reality I place myself.

3.2 Epistemology and Ontology

I draw on the Burrell and Morgan (1979) model which identifies four paradigms, representing four distinctly different perspectives in the analysis of social phenomena, namely 1) the functionalist paradigm which approaches social issues from a positivistic point of view, 2) the interpretive paradigm which analyses the social world from a subjective perspective, 3) the radical humanist paradigm which focuses on critiquing what they consider the alienated state of man and 4) the radical structuralist paradigm with the emphasis on structural relations within a realist social world. Each of these paradigms is defined by certain assumptions which in turn provide a frame of reference that influences the *modus operandi* of the social theorists who operate within the individual paradigms. The authors argue that the four paradigms are incommensurable and that a synthesis between them is not possible due to their contradictory nature. Switching from one paradigm to another is considered akin to a religious experience as the move from one paradigm to another means a major break with the intellectual tradition of a

particular paradigm. However, this is a belief that has subsequently been challenged by a number of researchers (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). For example, Cupchik (2001) proposes constructive realism as an alternative ontology that accommodates both positivism and constructivism. I have assumed the interpretive paradigm which rejects the concept of universal laws as in the scientific approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) interpretivism is synonymous with constructionism, sharing the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. Knowledge is perceived as constructed relationally with multiple perspectives coexisting and meaning imposed by the individual as opposed to existing independently in the world. Furthermore, learning is perceived as an active process of constructing rather than the acquisition of knowledge.

In describing approaches to research Robson (2002) states that at the objectivist end of the continuum the social world is perceived as concrete with an existence external to that of the individual. This gives rise to positivism and an emphasis on empirical analysis of objective forms of knowledge. It endeavours to understand the precise laws of nature, seeking cause and effect relationships. Understanding of the social world from this point of view emphasises clearly defined relationships externally in the social world. This particular stance requires specific laws and phenomena adhering to 'facts'. The relevant approach to research would be deductive, which means that a conceptual and theoretical structure is developed and

tested by empirical observation. The result is that a particular perspective is therefore deduced. As Garvey, *et al.* (2009) purport, the scientific approach derived from Newtonian thinking has dominated organisational life and management thinking.

On the other end of the continuum the subjectivist perspective perceives reality as being the projection of the imagination of the individual. The subjectivist paradigm challenges the idea of a reality external to the individual and therefore the existence of an objective knowledge. Instead, Morgan and Smircich (1980) suggest knowledge is the product of social construction. Rogers (1980) argues that there are as many realities as there are persons. According to constructionism reality does not therefore exist independently of the individual. An appreciation of the world is seen as being dependent from an understanding of how an individual shapes the world internally. This approach can be summarised as an inductive approach in which theory is developed from the observation of reality and general inferences are therefore induced. A fundamental premise of the inductive approach is that it is not possible to understand the social world in terms of causal relationships. Human relationships and human action are infused by intentions, values, beliefs and attitudes. In order to understand human action therefore one has to understand the internal logic that drives such action. In my view it is futile to impose an external logic upon human action as it is inappropriate in generating understanding of human behaviour.

I have positioned myself on the inductive end of the continuum which means I do not perceive a universal truth out there awaiting discovery. Not only does the inductive approach reflect my own personal values and beliefs in terms of my position on truth and reality, but I also perceive it to be the most appropriate way of attaining the knowledge and understanding I am seeking to contribute to my particular research subject. I argue that coaching is subjective which therefore leads me to adopt the subjective end of the continuum through which to approach my research. My perspective on knowledge is therefore from a constructionist position and permeates my entire research project. As a constructionist, I do not consider a single array of words able to uniquely portray reality. Instead, I consider that there are many interpretations as to what constitutes reality.

According to Gergen (1997) the very act of understanding the nature of something acknowledges the realisation that it may be otherwise. On the other hand, as Robson (2002) suggests a positivistic view of reality holds that what is known is as a result of experimenting and understanding external phenomena and their true nature. Smircich (1983) is of the same opinion as Gergen (1997) and perceives the meaning people draw from their experiences to be a result of actions that take place within a wider context. When people talk and engage with each other relationally, the world gets constructed. Bruner (1990) suggests that explanations are not to be found within the psyche of the individual nor in the social structures, but instead in the interactive processes that take place routinely between people.

Social constructionism postulates that the striving for objectivity is futile as I am likely to experience the world from a certain perspective which will differ from the perspective of another researcher. Constructionism views the researcher as playing an active role in the creation of the knowledge that will emerge as a result of the research process. Research from a constructionist perspective recognises that the multiple conversations the researcher engages in reflects a multiplicity of realities and not one, ultimate reality. As Gergen (1985) therefore concludes, constructionism is communal resulting in the participative construction of knowledge. Mir and Watson (2000) propose that the constructionist approach to research is that of sculpting; I, the researcher, am part of the process which will determine the problem as well as the creation of the solution. A social constructionist philosophy encourages society to be open to possibilities and to reconstruct reality through a process of continuous reflection. Such a philosophy is central to my research approach and supported by the principles of hermeneutics and introduced later on in this chapter.

3.3 A Qualitative Approach

Following the inductive research position I adopted and the subjective nature of the phenomenon I am researching, I believe the most appropriate methodology for my research to be that of a qualitative approach. This approach emphasises the qualities of processes and meanings and which are

not necessarily measured. From the epistemological perspective there is no reality external to human existence and the researcher and the object under investigation are interlinked and therefore shaping the inquiry. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) suggest that as researcher the choice between quantitative or qualitative method is not a decision to be made in the abstract, but is dependent on the research problem and research object and a consideration which has driven my choice for a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research tends to work with a small number of cases (Silverman, 2000). Quantitative studies place emphasis on the measurement and analysis between variables and their causal relationship. In addition, quantitative research goes to great lengths to demonstrate the value-free framework within which research is conducted. In contrast, a qualitative approach encompasses many methodological practices and in turn the qualitative researcher may take on multiple identities and images, deploying whatever tools and strategies are required. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue what emerges is an image of the qualitative researcher as bricoleur; one who is able to assemble disparate images into that of a montage, presenting truth in a heretofore unrepresented format. As an interpretive bricoleur I recognise that my own assumptions, beliefs, culture, gender and role in the research setting influences and affects how I approach my research. Tsoukas and Hatch (2001) suggest once inside the story of the system under investigation, narrators become part of the stories they tell. I relate this to my own situation and it could be argued that because I am so close to

coaching and very much a part of the coaching system, that I have been biased in the cues I have selected. On the other hand, as described in detail in the previous chapter, the hermeneutic approach is for the researcher to immerse herself inside the story or stories she is endeavouring to make sense of (McAuley, 1985). Furthermore, my presence within the system will generate another little narrative of coaching as proposed by Lyotard (1979).

However, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) propose that qualitative research faces strong opposition and go on to say that the work of the qualitative researcher is considered unscientific and subjective. A fundamental attack from the positivist quarter is the accusation that the findings of the qualitative researcher are that of fiction, not fact and cannot be verified. A crucial difference is that traditional science assumes a stable and unchanging reality, whereas the qualitative researcher engages with the world of lived experiences. On the other hand, Denzin and Lincoln (2000:8) state that the achievements of the positivistic sciences are viewed as the, "... crowning achievements of Western civilization." According to Strauss (1987:1), qualitative research findings are, "... not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification." Instead, as the hermeneutic tradition advocates, it is about immersing oneself in the subjective and changing world of the phenomena.

3.4 Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

The ontological and epistemological position I have assumed leads me to theories of critical and self-reflective discourses such as critical theory, phenomenology, and existentialism. As stated, the paradigm I have aligned my research with is that of interpretivism which recognises that phenomena are socially constructed. Phenomenology as a philosophy is the theoretical perspective of interpretivism and associated with an inductive approach as defined by Gibson and Hanes (2003). It seeks to gain the essence and meaning of experience to reach a subjective understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Gibson and Hanes (2003) go on to suggest that phenomenology is a mechanism through which the researcher can gain insight into the complexities of life and her experiences thereof. A primary assumption of phenomenology is therefore to seek meaning from experiences. A significant differentiation of phenomenology with other qualitative methods is that it seeks the meaning of experiences rather than merely a description of experiences and the reason why I selected phenomenology as my research approach.

Furthermore, narrative as methodology provides the language through which we interpret the meaning we make of our experiences. According to Gibson and Hanes (2003:183), "This meaning is interpreted through language and thus leads to a reality that is socially constructed rather than a reality that exists outside the meanings that humans attribute to it." According to

Polkinghorne (2007) it is through narrative research that we come to understand the meaning people make through the experiences they encounter. "It makes claims about how people understand situations, others, and themselves." Polkinghorne (2007:476). Narrative research is the interpretation of the storied text collected by the researcher which reflects the interpretive paradigm as suggested by the model put forward by Burrell and Morgan (1979) above. The storied text in my research project includes the stories told by my respondents of their experiences of coaching during interviews as well as their reflections provided in written format, details of which are provided in the following chapter. In order to create meaning from their stories, I chose hermeneutics as the route through which to do so. Sparrowe (2005) suggests that hermeneutics is clearly anchored within the interpretive paradigm and contained within phenomenology. The hermeneutic form of knowing reflects the reliance on subjective understanding as a source of knowledge. The primary task of hermeneutics is ultimately to integrate all knowledge of the sciences into personal knowing as it is experienced. As coaching deals very much with the subjective nature of the coachee, I argue that a hermeneutic approach is best suited to gain an understanding of the inner world of the coachee.

Moustakas (1994) suggests that approaching research from a hermeneutic perspective means the researcher will also experience a growth of self-knowledge and greater self-awareness. As pointed out by Gadamer (1975), our experience of the world is not found in an isolated consciousness, but

through the hermeneutic dialogue of question and answer. I argue that the theme of dialogue as facilitator of learning is a fundamental presence within coaching which I introduced in Chapter 2. The coaching process is concerned with the coachee interacting with their environment, interpreting events and ascribing personal meaning to those events and experiences. The same is true of me as the researcher and the meanings I ascribe to those events may be different from the experiences of the coachee. Collectively we are engaged in meaning making. According to Hammond, *et al.* (1991) phenomenology is about how things are experienced, both through the senses such as seeing, hearing and touching, as well as more subjective phenomena such as believing, remembering, wishing, imagining, feelings, envy, anger, judging and evaluation. Equally, the purpose of my study is to understand how my participants have experienced the phenomena of coaching. It is through our senses that we become aware of the world and others around us which may then lead to subjective and personal value judgements of what we have observed and experienced through our senses.

The description of phenomena in phenomenology is not concerned with phenomena distinct from the 'real', but simply a description of how it is experienced. In the discussion of the methodology of phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) introduces the term *Epoché*, a Greek word meaning to abstain from judgement and the way in which day to day things are perceived. Instead of judging, Epoché requires the observer to look at things in a way that is new and fresh, from a different vantage point. The term

Epoché is a method of understanding that the world out there is without meaning until we turn our intention to it. This is what I have endeavoured to achieve with my research; to explore the coaching experience from a new perspective and to see and experience what the coachees have experienced through the telling of their stories.

A phenomenological approach to truth grew out of a dissonance with a positivistic approach to truth, which was seen to discredit the experience of the person and their consciousness with that of the world. On the other hand, in phenomenology, perception is the primary source of knowledge which is continually changing and evolving depending on the position from which the individual processes that knowledge. In the empirical disciplines physicality is perceived as the starting point for all theorizing, which must be anchored to that which is observable. In contrast the subjective and interpretive approach is to begin with the immediacy of consciousness itself, as with phenomenology, where meaning and interpretation supersedes the primacy of behaviour. This is true of my study which seeks to understand the interpretation my participants place on their experiences of coaching.

According to Gadamer (1975) phenomenology focuses on the examination of the structures of consciousness from within, challenging all third-person attempts to explain consciousness in terms of natural science. Furthermore, it challenges the foundational assumption that runs throughout scientific enquiry, namely the dualistic split between subject and object and an

assumption upon which modern day science is based. Individuals do not make sense of themselves and others in isolation, but instead do so through their inter-relational context (Weick, 1979; Gergen, 1985; Bruner, 1990). Should knowledge and awareness of self and others arise through and within relatedness, then what is revealed is inevitably uncertain or incomplete.

From the inspirations of phenomenology, existential hermeneutics adopted three ideas namely, knowledge being intuitive and particularly within the web of the historical context, the second idea originated from the concept of an experience as promoted by Husserl (Welton, 1999). According to existential hermeneutics we are and always have been within the world, a world that is intended. Intentionality being the third idea, we are set in a context that is practical and our understanding is not only theoretical, but also intended on mastering the practical environment and thereby expressing the possibilities of our existence. Existential hermeneutics rejects the division between object and subject and instead focuses their interest on what Heidegger (1962) has termed Being-in-the-world (in-der-Welt-sein). People are seen as being irrevocably merged with the world. Gadamer (1976) expressed this as simply 'belonging'. What therefore becomes the focus of the research is the study of the individual within situations in their life.

According to (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) understanding, even in its simplest of forms, contributes to self-understanding. This leaves the

individual with multiple choices. Phenomenology is described as being anti-essentialism and perceives both the social world as well as self as the products of social processes. The notion of truth then becomes problematic as phenomenology does not perceive external objective facts. Instead it argues that theories and explanations of truth become time and culture bound and cannot therefore be taken as a once-and-for-all description of human nature. Furthermore, the ways in which the world is understood are not derived from objective reality but from other people, past and present. Merleau-Ponty (1955) suggests that what is encountered perceptually is also a lived experience.

Hermeneutical reflection is a two way process and perceives understanding of another to include a critique of oneself which is reflected in the beliefs of social constructionism. The one who understands admits that her own assumed truth is put to the test during the process of understanding. Therefore understanding contributes to the development of self-knowledge. For Gadamar (1975) true understanding embraces both an objective as well as a subjective understanding. The hermeneutic approach is a process whereby the researcher attempts to enter the world of others. Hermeneutics can therefore be defined as the philosophy of the interpretation of meaning and what I as researcher have endeavoured to achieve is to both suspend my own assumptions as well as to understand the meaning and transformation the coachee may experience as a result of the coaching process. There is a widespread acceptance of the hermeneutic claim that all thought involves

interpretation and according to Wachterhauser (1994) widely divergent thinkers accept the hermeneutic axiom either implicitly or explicitly. This is particularly true of proponents of sensemaking and constructivism.

One of the reasons for selecting a hermeneutic approach to my research is that hermeneutics is not static. As I read the texts or the transcripts of interviews the meaning of the texts are changing all the time just as I the reader change all the time and as my self-understanding develops (Jasper, 2004). The complexity therefore of what is meant by "reading", "text", "author" and even "storyteller" is not self-evident. There are endless examples of how the textual world has affected and influenced the thinking and understanding of mankind and what is experienced as 'reality' and 'truth' and how narrators have managed to grip the imagination of the public with their words over the centuries. Many of the great literary giants such a Shakespeare and Dickens to name only two, have both had a profound influence on society. I would not expect to achieve the same response in my audience as they have. I would, however, through the retelling of the stories of my participants endeavour to remove some of the veils of mystery enveloping the practice of coaching made more explicit through the retelling of the stories of my participants. Chapter 5 shares the common themes my participants have identified following their experiences of coaching.

Wachterhauser (1994) suggests that proponents of a hermeneutic approach argue that we could never arrive at a truth that is free of any doubt or distortions. Gadamer (1975) went further and suggested that truth claims can only be understood in relation to the context of the questions asked by the researcher. With a different set of questions different truth claims would be discovered. The questions posed by the researcher reveal both the truth and the falsity of the answers and different questions will reveal a different set of truth and falsity. Pluralism is a significant theme in the hermeneutic tradition and one of the main tenets is that truth is better served by different interpretations of the same phenomenon as opposed to a single account, irrespective of its claims to authority. This is because many perspectives reveal the inherent richness of the phenomenon as well as the inherent historical contexts. There is therefore not just 'my world', but many 'my worlds'.

Schwandt (2000) purports that at the heart of hermeneutics is the fact that the human sciences are radically different from the natural sciences. The argument is that the human sciences endeavour to understand the subjectivity of human behaviour and action. In fact, hermeneutics is not seen as a procedure, but the very condition of being human, "Understanding *is* interpretation." as stated by Schwandt (2000:194). Understanding is seen as dialogical and participative in nature. As researcher I have therefore engaged in a dialogue with the coachees and their stories to develop an understanding of their experiences.

3.5 The Hermeneutic Circle

The philosopher, Gadamer (2006) who is associated with contemporary hermeneutics, said that it is an approach rather than a method. Hermeneutics endeavours to understand the world from the perspective of another, embracing the cultural and social forces that may have influenced their perspective. The hermeneutic circle describes the process of understanding a text hermeneutically (See Figure 3). It refers to the idea that understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts and an understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole. The hermeneutic circle suggests that no individual part can be understood without reference to one another and therefore it is described as a circle. Furthermore, it stresses that the meaning of text must be found within its cultural, historical, and literary context. Gadamer (1975) offers a warning when reading the texts that I do not assume that my position as reader is objective and stable. Instead, Gadamer posits that I read from a position of historical flux and that a particular vantage point is no more absolute or objective than that of another.

As the researcher is seen as an acknowledge part of the subject of study, she is expected to approach the research activity with an intellectual pre-understanding or hunch. I have put forward in Chapter 1 the hunch with which I have approached my studies. This is opposed to the positivistic stance which assumes that the researcher is outside of the situation and

maintaining a constant objective stance. The hermeneutic hunch differs from a research hypothesis which is proposed as an explanation of the phenomena to be researched and which the research project then seeks to prove or disprove. The hermeneutic hunch is more tentative and less specific and may include a number of possible meanings or interpretations of the phenomena being researched. Instead it allows the text to reveal its hidden meaning. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) argue that the knowledge and understanding of the research subject grow so the initial understanding merges with the new understanding. The result is that the researcher does not assume a false sense of authority in relation to the circle of readers, but instead engages them in a dialogue of alternatives. The research process therefore remains open as it can be expected that new arguments and understanding will emerge in the future.

A parallel approach is to be found in coaching whereby both the coach and the coachee may have an initial understanding about the particular issues the coachee may be facing. This understanding is then further tested and delved into deeper through a dialogue between the coach and coachee. A statement offered by Gadamer during a Colloquium in Heidelberg in 1989 (Grondin, 1991:124) states, 'The possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics.' Understanding can only come from ongoing dialogue. 'Only in conversation, only in confrontation with another's thought that could also come to dwell within us, can we hope to get beyond the limits of our present horizon.'

As far as hermeneutics is concerned there is no higher principle than dialogue. I therefore perceive the hermeneutic circle as a model best suited for the research of the coaching experience, which in many ways is a very personal experience for the coachee.

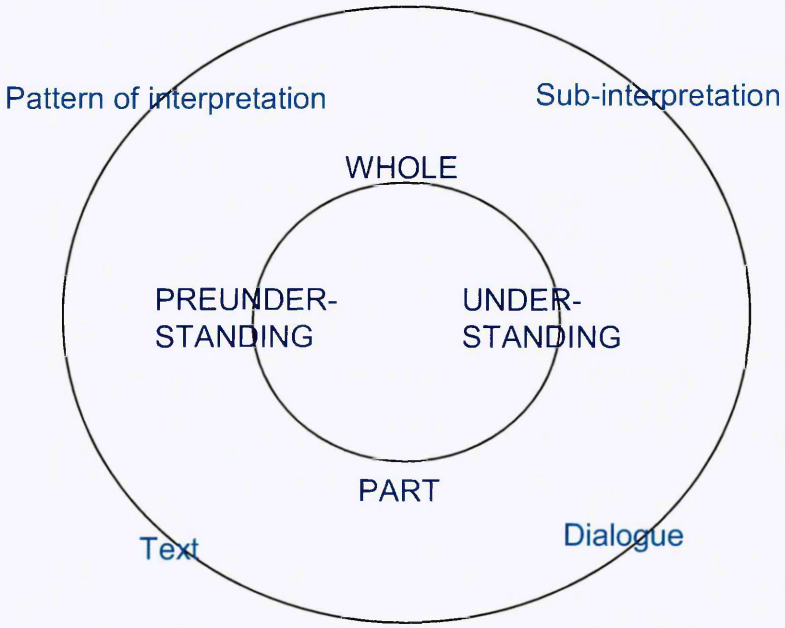


Figure 3.1 The Hermeneutic circle: basic version (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009)

Irrespective of the particular hermeneutic approach that may be assumed, one key element they have in common is that of intuition. Hermeneutics suggest that the act of knowing is not only achieved through logic and rational reasoning, but instead it may also be achieved in a flash of insight.

According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) intuition suggests a form of inner gazing. The first form of intuition is the intuition that leads to an understanding of the underlying meaning rather than an explanation of causal connections. The second form of knowing has its focus on truth in which the polarity between subject and object becomes irrelevant in favour of unity.

Gadamer (1975) argues that according to philosophical hermeneutics understanding is only possible when the researcher brings her own presuppositions into play. This is reinforced by the meaning of the word *hermeneutics* which is the English version of the classical Greek word *hermeneus* and which means an interpreter or expounder. In Greek philosophy Hermes was the messenger of the gods, responsible for carrying the secrets of the gods of Olympus to the human realm. Without Hermes as interpreter it would not have been possible for these two worlds to communicate. In the same spirit I too endeavoured to be the messenger of the secrets of transformative coaching to a wider group of people and translate its mystical nature as experienced by the coachees and told through their stories.

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) suggest that interpretation has become more and more linked with empathy. Understanding requires the researcher to enter the world of the situation of the person one is endeavouring to gain an insight into. One could conclude that hermeneutics is therefore about

interpretation and even translation. This has meant the interpretation of sacred texts, but social scientists have come to view it as the interpretation and translation of narratives and stories, which has been the approach I have taken. In the following chapter I introduce the sensemaking framework described by Weick (1995) as methodology to support my understanding of the stories told by my participants.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the hermeneutic circle offers a research framework compatible with my epistemological and ontological positions. It also provides the context and philosophical underpinning for the methodologies and methods I have selected and which are discussed in the following chapter. The philosophical position I have assumed suggests that sensemaking is a valid methodology through which to make sense of the research data I have collected. The arguments in support of this statement are put forward in the next chapter. It also introduces the justification for storytelling as a method of analysis in support of a sensemaking methodology. Storytelling is in keeping with the hermeneutic philosophy which states that the story is never fully told and that with each telling of the story the narrator is given the opportunity to reflect on previous meanings and interpretations, allowing new insights to emerge.

4

Methodology

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Sensemaking as Methodology

A justification of the methodology flows from the chapter on research philosophy and the purpose of this chapter is therefore to introduce sensemaking as a methodological framework and one which I argue is in keeping with the hermeneutic traditions. It is through the process of hermeneutic circling through the various forms of data that I made sense of the stories of my participants which resulted in the themes which eventually emerged. Sensemaking provides the structure through which the researcher is able to make sense of the respondents' experiences of the research phenomena. The relationship between phenomenology, hermeneutics and narrative is discussed extensively in the previous chapter. Sensemaking as put forward by Weick (1995) provides a framework to describe the importance of the co-constructive relationship between the coach and coachee which has emerged from the experience of my respondents.

According to Weick (1995) the researcher both constructs and selects the theoretical representations of the target subject. This assumption is shared by the hermeneutic philosophy which expects the researcher to actively participate in the cycle of creating meaning from the data collected. The sensemaking framework allowed me to make sense of the complexity of the stories told through the various forms of data. Furthermore, sensemaking as

an interpretive framework shares the assumption that meaning making is a co-constructive process. I also argue in this chapter that sensemaking is a key component in the coaching process and I support this assertion in more depth in later chapters. I introduce the Tamara metaphor as described by Boje (1995) which also helps to understand the participants as characters of the research story and how their experiences of coaching have contributed to the emergence of certain themes. The chapter also goes on to introduce the participants in the research journey.

4.2 The Seven Characteristics of Sensemaking

Narrative researchers can potentially focus on an endless number of issues, including identity (Becker, 1997; Denzin, 1989; Funkenstein, 1993), communication, culture, learning and sensemaking (Rhodes & Brown, 2005), power relationships and competing truths (West, 2001). The challenge for me as researcher is that I will not only be making sense of one story, but often multiple and interrelated stories. In support of a more creative and non-traditional approach to theorising, I introduce sensemaking in the context of the seven properties put forward by Weick (1995) and concur with his suggestion that analyses of the research data is an act of sensemaking. Sensemaking therefore provides a supporting framework through which to understand the research journey and act as a guide in analysing the research data.

4.2.1 Grounded in Identity Construction

Weick argues that sensemaking "begins with a sensemaker" and which supports the salient thread that runs through all of Weick's analysis of sensemaking namely: "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick, 1995:18). Furthermore, he argues that the sensemaker never does so in isolation, which reflects the arguments of constructionism that it is a collective process. On the research journey I as the sensemaker will make sense of the data collected and in partnership with my participants the story which will emerge is therefore the result of interaction and co-construction. The constructionist idea is poetically described by Pablo Neruda's (1968) poem "We are Many" and I provide the following verse, quoted by Weick:

> While I am writing, I'm far away;
> and when I come back, I've gone
> I would like to know if others
> go through the same things I do,
> have as many selves as I have,
> and see themselves similarly;
> and when I've exhausted this problem,
> I'm going to study so hard
> that when I explain myself,
> I'll be talking geography.

Identity is perceived as the result of the process of interaction; a belief supported by social constructionism (Gergen 1991). Gergen (1991) also refers to the multiple identities, or the pastiche

personality, that results from numerous interactions which in turn lead to different identities which are in continual construction and reconstruction. A salient notion is that whatever the individual perceives her identity to be, will effect what she perceives as being external to her. Furthermore, Weick (1995) suggests that people learn about themselves by projecting themselves into their environment and learning from the feedback this generates. Bruner (1991) proposes that people therefore both react to and are shaped by their environment whilst influencing and contributing to the environment they experience. As suggested earlier, this also applies to my research journey and the construction and reconstruction I experienced with my participants and their stories in making sense of the research data.

4.2.2 Retrospective

Weick (1995) argues that it is only after the event that we have an understanding of what it is we did or experienced. Similarly, as the researcher I am only able to make sense of the research journey in retrospect. Weick (1995) goes on to suggest that the perceived world is in fact a world in the past. Furthermore, Weick, *et al.* add that since sensemaking is a retrospective process, complete accuracy in the recall and interpretation of events is therefore not possible (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Weick (1995) argues that in an

ever changing and shifting reality, perceptions of reality can never be accurate. Instead, Weick (1995) suggests that in the postmodern world with conflicting and ever changing identities and realities, accuracy seems pointless and of not much use in the process of making sense of the complexity and ambiguity faced by people. Instead what is relevant is our interpretations of reality as this will influence how we will experience and react to the world around us.

A hermeneutic approach, discussed in the previous chapter, emphasises the retrospective sentiment and argues that with each telling of the story new meaning will be revealed. These arguments would therefore suggest that the collective story I have told of the individual stories of my participants does not lay claim to an accurate and overarching story; it is my interpretation of their journey and no doubt a different researcher would have told a different story or at a different period in time I may also have told a different story. Positivism seeks accuracy whereas constructionism accepts that different perspectives will exist and instead values concepts such as authenticity and coherence. The process of sensemaking as an ongoing and flowing activity eliminates the existence of a fixed accuracy outside the process.

4.2.3 Enactive of Sensible Environments

Sensemaking involves the senses and the "making" is the process we engage in to gain clarity of what we have sensed (Weick, 1995). The enactment we engage in contributes to the creation of the environment we find ourselves in. We are engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the environment in that we construct what we expect to experience which in turns influences the identities we associate with. This places us in a co-creative relationship with the environment and others, an argument supported by social constructionism. Weick (1995) suggests that our enacted world is not only tangible, but also subjective as it is has it origins in our mental models and connected to the categories we draw on to create the artefacts in the first place. Weick (1995) goes on to quote Varela *et al.* (1991) who suggest that the world is not a pre-given, but constantly becoming through our actions and interactions with it.

I conclude that Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as an ongoing, retrospective activity which we engage in collectively within our relationships or communities of practice. Equally, my participants and I have created a community of practice through which I am retrospectively making sense of. As Weick (1995) suggests as soon as we become aware of an experience it is already in the past; it is the retrospective action of capturing a moment in the continuous

flow of the present. He goes on to say that we can only capture and understand what we have already made sense of.

Huzzard (2004) suggests that sensemaking is also reliant on dealing with equivocality rather than certainty. The ability to make sense of new situations may very well require the sensemaker to disrupt taken-for-granted sense made, or as Pratt (2000) describes it; sensebreaking. Equally, my research story is therefore one of possible disruption of assumptions I may have of coaching and the interpretation of the stories of enactment and sensemaking of my participants, which in itself is also a retrospective act.

4.2.4 Social

The shared meaning people create within the communities they inhabit is sustained through a common language and the social interaction they engage in daily. Boje *et al.* (1999) suggest that storytelling is the collective and socially negotiated creation of meaning. Socialisation is the milieu within which our sensemaking takes place. We are often influenced by the sense made of others and in turn shape and influence the meanings they make and the sensemaking processes they engage with. The social process is not limited to talking and conversations, but includes the values, frames of references and meanings we assign to situations. This process also

applies to the research community and how each of the participants will influence the sense made by others.

Weick (1995) states that the context within which people make sense of their world is an important factor as it has a strong influence on what will eventually be experienced as reality. Bruner (1990) posits that an understanding of the social context provides the norms and standards by which new experiences are measured. He goes on to suggest that central to the notion of human psychology is the conflict in meaning and the necessary transactions to construct meaning. Furthermore, he concurs that human life and mind are not shaped by biological factors, but by human constructed cultural environments. The activity of research is equally a process of constructing meaning from what is experienced as part of the process. Grisham, (2006) is in agreement and suggests that collectively people are able to negotiate, discuss and construct a reality that makes sense to them at a particular moment in time.

According to Colville *et al.* (1999) rhetoric is always involved in the process of sensemaking and the sense made is therefore a matter of words and only a representation of reality. Narratives therefore act as the vehicle through which we come to understand our world. The recounting and listening to stories has been a significant tool in our evolution through which people have learned and developed.

According to Gergen (1991) it is also through narrative and dialogue within our relationships that we create our identities. Through the collaborative process of narrative and storytelling, are we able to critically assess prevailing assumptions and meanings. Consequently, through the sharing off our stories are we able to understand how others make sense of the world and the assumptions that underpin their beliefs. Grisham concludes (2006) that politicians, artists, philosophers and playwrights have successfully crafted stories throughout the centuries for the purpose of transferring knowledge, eliciting emotive feelings and as a power for persuasion. The research story is similarly crafted from the data collected.

4.2.5 Ongoing

Sensemaking is described as a process without beginning nor end; a continuous flow of meaning creation. This understanding of the ongoing nature of sensemaking is a shared belief in the hermeneutic circle which recognises that there is no starting point, nor a conclusion to situations. Instead we are constantly revising and building provisional assumptions. Sensemaking as an ongoing activity enacted through conversation, storytelling, narration and linguistic abilities, suggest that they all play a part in the process of making sense of the complexity and ambiguity we operate in. If sensemaking is an ongoing, social process we can argue that the

future is unpredictable. People may therefore through conversations and narrations jointly make sense of the unknown which helps to create the reality they will experience at a given time.

Weick (1995) suggests that we only become aware of this flow when it is interrupted and which results in an emotional reaction. The awareness of interruption signals that changes in the environment have occurred. Those emotions may be either positive or negative, depending on the nature of the changes or the interpretation of those changes; which in turn will influence subsequent sensemaking. I can relate this to the research journey both my participants and I have been on. It is true to say that our individual emotional reactions to the sense we have made of the coaching experience interrupted the assumptions we had of coaching at the time. For example, I experienced surprise at the reoccurring theme of the value many of my participants attached to the coaching space. It engendered a high level of positive emotions in them which was apparent when they referred to it.

4.2.6 Focused on by Extracted Cues

According to Weick (1995) sensemaking is swift which means we become aware of the product of sensemaking before the process. He goes on to suggest that we select simple cues which provides us with

a sense of familiarity and a sense of the larger sensemaking that might be happening. Such cues also provide a point of reference and which can be seen as an important source of power as it has the ability to direct attention.

The context within which a cue is noticed as well as the value assigned, is also of significance. It explains why cues will have different meanings depending on the context within which they are identified. The faith in cues will in turn determine or influence enactment, leading to the notion of self-fulfilling prophecies. The themes which have emerged from the stories of my participants are examples of the cues Weick (1995) refers to. These cues or themes have become the focus of my sensemaking and one could argue that I have, because of these cues, created a self-fulling prophecy by selecting data in support of my cues. It is through the selection of cues that we come to tell the stories that we do.

4.2.7 Driven by Plausibility Rather Than Accuracy

Weick (1995) challenges the assumption that the construction of the word, *sensemaking*, might lead to a realist ontology which expects a reality out there which is sensed. Instead, as introduced above, he argues that accuracy is a nicety, not a necessity. "Instead, sensemaking is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence,

reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality" (Weick, 1995:57).

As discussed previously, people select and filter certain cues as part of the sensemaking process, which will depend on the context within which they find themselves. Furthermore, the selection may vary from person to person. In addition, people will embellish and elaborate on their selected cues. A crucial element is also that the past is a reconstruction which did not occur in the way it is remembered. Instead of pursuing the myth of accuracy, Weick (1995) suggests what is needed is a good story. Why? Because a good story is capable of holding different elements together long enough to guide and generate action. He concludes with a central tenet of postmodernism which suggests that the equivocal postmodern world is permeated with different interpretations, conflicting interests and populated by people with multiple and ever changing identities. Hence the value of a story as it provides themes and workable maps that could be recreated depending on the order and sense of the future.

In my opinion, sensemaking as described through the seven characteristics of Weick (1995) provides a framework which describes the research journey. As researcher I embarked on a retrospective journey of sensemaking of the data collected, but this is

not an activity which took place in isolation. Instead, through interaction with the data and my participants, sense has emerged. The emergent themes acted as cues which contributed to the meaning I have extracted.

4.3 Sensemaking through Action

A number of exponents of sensemaking are of the opinion that it can also be set in motion through action (Boland, 1984; Smircich and Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1995). Weick goes beyond perceived wisdom which argues that understanding guides action and adds that action guides understanding. Proponents of action research such as Reason and Bradbury (2008) for example, support the necessity for action in order to create understanding. The reality we experience is often the result of actions we have taken previously. The notion of enactment firmly places the responsibility for the reality experienced at the feet of the enacted, supporting the principles of social constructionism. Enactment casts us in the role of creators of our own environment.

In interpreting the work of Weick (1995), Gioia (2006) goes one step further and argues that the human hand is apparent in the construction of many events that may often be labelled as the result of higher forces. Boland (1984) suggests that the environment, through continuous enactment, is thus created rather than presented as objectively knowable. Smircich and

Stubbart (1985:731) state that, "... the idea of enactment underscores a view that one's own actions and the actions of others make an organisation and its environment." The root notion is that, "Individually or collectively, we create what we confront." (Gioia, 2006:1715). Enactment is also intimately bound up with ecological change. Through the process of enactment the sensemaker directly engages an external environment which in turn bends around the enactments of people. The idea of making sense through enactment is in support of the theories of adult learning, and action learning in particular, as made famous by Kolb's (1984) learning cycle and discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Smircich and Stubbart (1985:724) developed the view, "... that environments are enacted through the social construction and interaction processes of organized actors." Equally, through enactment in the learning environment my participants and I constructed the meaning of coaching which emerged through the themes identified in the following chapter. As Weick (1995) states, sensemaking is an active process and warns against associating sensemaking with some of the more passive phenomena, such as perception and representation that accepts the environment as given. From the perspective of a realist, sensemaking would be seen as a problem of discovery, whereas the constructionist considers sensemaking as a problem of invention.

Brown (1994) defines s*ense* as feeling, thought and meaning within a particular context and as perceived by the senses; the faculty of perception or sensation. He goes on to argue that sensemaking can be construed as the cognitive activity that determines knowledge and understanding. Weick (1995) sees sensemaking as the process through which people reduce the complexity of their environment to a level which makes sense to them. Continuing with the idea of sensemaking as a meaning creating activity, Dougherty *et al.* (2000) describes sensemaking as the process through which various information, insights and ideas coalesce into something useful, or *stick* together in a meaningful way. Sensemaking is about being the author and interpreter, creator as well as discoverer (Weick, 1995). I can relate to the ideas put forward by the proponents of sensemaking as I assumed the different roles suggested by Weick (1995) to make sense of the information and ideas I collected and interpreted, resulting in the story that has unfolded.

4.4 The Role of Emotions in Sensemaking

It could be argued that a scientific approach to research would question the role of emotion in the process. However, the creative act of knowing, as put forward by Weick (1995), is accompanied by emotions. The emotional mind provides us with a balance to the rational, logical and deductive form of comprehension and which is described by Day and Leitch (2001) as deliberate. The emotional mind is intuitive, impulsive, fast and perceived by some as illogical. Irrespective of our awareness of them, emotions are

intricately connected with many areas of our functioning. Parker (2006) argues that emotions have a fundamental role in our human experiences. This argument is supported by others, such as Carl Rogers, and introduced in earlier chapters. I discuss at length In Chapter 2 the role of emotions as a significant element in adult learning as well as being a part of the coaching experience.

Day and Leitch (2001) purport that it is through our subjective and emotional world that we develop our personal constructs and meanings of our outer experiences and the sensemaking of these events and relationships. Bradbury *et al.* (2008) draw on new development of the neurophysiology of the brain which provides additional insight into the fundamental role emotions play in the process of decision making, for example when faced with a choice, and which is intimately bound up with sensemaking. This finding is supported by other authors in relation to storytelling (Allan *et al.*, 2002; Gabriel, 2004).

As discussed in Chapter 2, different disciplines have influenced the practice and assumptions of coaching. The contribution of a therapeutic practice has been its recognition of the importance of an understanding and inclusion of emotions in bringing about change. Many people enter a therapeutic relationship with maladaptive emotions that leave them feeling stuck and often with a sense of despair. According to Greenberg and Bolger (2001) to bring about change it is first of all necessary for the individual to become

aware of these emotions. Secondly, it is necessary for the maladaptive emotion to be replaced with a more adaptive one. This process is often supported by storytelling. The use of storytelling within a therapeutic environment is not a new concept (Parker, 2006) and emotions are seen as an important element in the telling of the story. Equally within the research story, the emotions accompanying the data may also enhance the depth of the meaning revealed through the interpretation of the narratives. This leads me to argue that the personal act of making sense of the coaching experience will have greater meaning if the accompanying emotions are acknowledged. I support this assertion by way of the example given through the story told by Carl Rogers discussed in the introduction.

4.5 Making Sense through Constructionism

Weick (1999a) is forthright in his criticism of the triviality of some theories as he perceives theorists to be hampered by methodological objectives that favour validation over the usefulness of the theories. He argues that this approach does not take into account the value of imagination, representation and selection in the research process nor does it recognise alternative approaches such as mapping, conceptual development and speculative thought. He also suggests that a mechanistic approach to theorising often overlooks the contribution made by an intuitive, sometimes wasteful, serendipitous and creative approach and which aptly describes the way in which I have selected the themes which have emerged from my research

data. In fact, Weick (1989) goes as far to say that if theorising follows a linear problem solving approach, the outcome is likely to be unremarkable. He suggested that theory construction should be viewed as a process of 'disciplined imagination' which will result in a shift of focus from a possible rule-based generation of theory to the inclusion of metaphors and a creative variation in imagination. Theory construction then becomes characterised by simultaneous as opposed to sequential thinking.

Social constructionism is also concerned with the practical aspect of knowledge. The concern is not what may be construed as truth, but instead what the implication for truth is on cultural life (Gergen and Gergen, 2008). This argument has wider implications on the way in which research is conducted. Gergen and Gergen (2008) suggest that the main tenet of constructionism is that knowledge, reason and morality does not reside within the mind of the individual, but in relationships. Implicit in the criticisms of some approaches to theorising put forward by Weick, (1989, 1999a, 1999b) is a rejection of an absolutist stance to truth, which argues for the inclusion of contextual influences (Day and Leitch, 2001). Day and Leitch (2001) continue and argue that according to constructionism, truth is an ever changing landscape that taps into the rich interplay between experience, conceptualisation and a communal understanding. What is then perceived as reality emerges as a result of such interaction. The philosophy of constructionism which underpins my approach to research is also associated with adult learning and the co-constructive relationship between

the educator and learner. I suggest that the same is true of the relationship between the coach and coachee which leads to the emergence of the output. In keeping with the discussion of the co-constructive nature of sensemaking offered by Weick above, I suggest the coach and coachee co-construct the sense they make within the coaching relationship or space as referred to by my respondents.

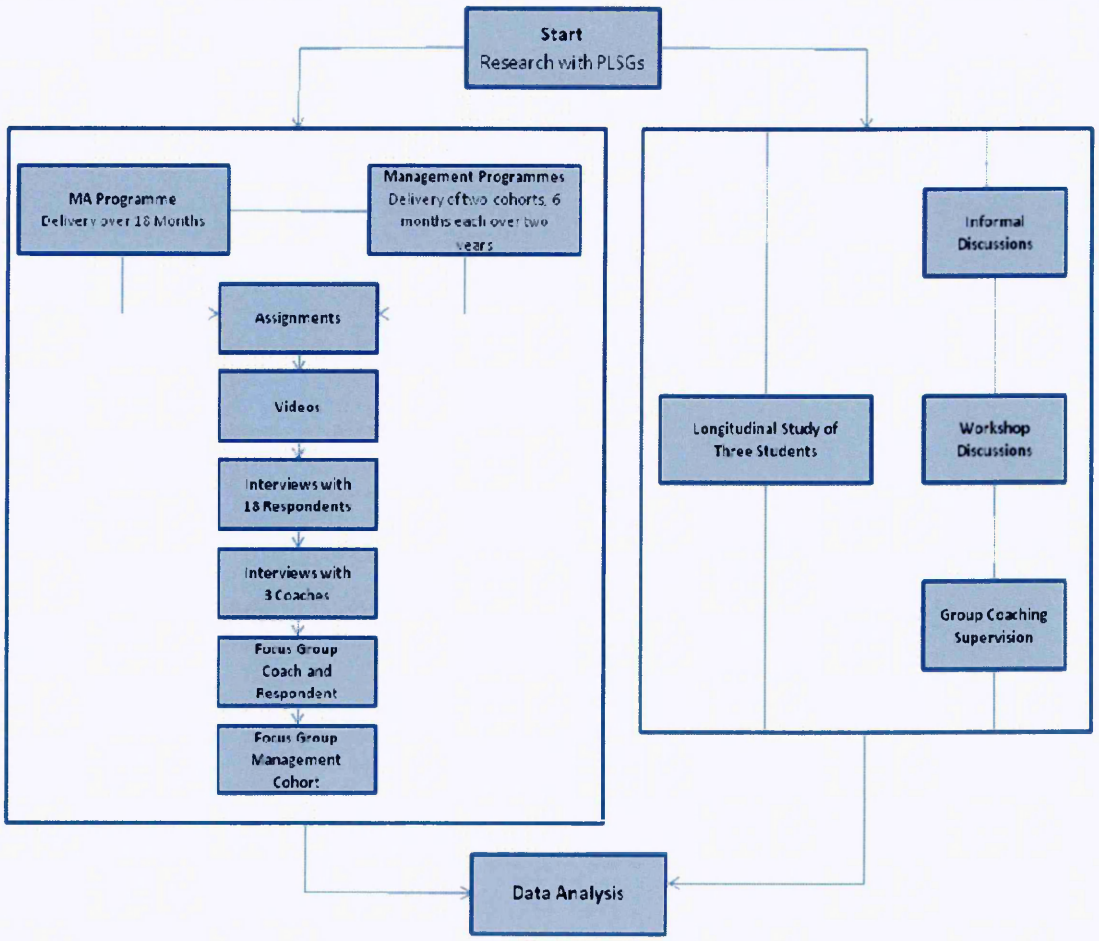
Personal construct psychology as defined by Kelly (1991) adds voice to the argument that the individual is both narrator and actor in the drama of her own life. Furthermore, it perceives the individual as having a personal story which she can recurrently invent. In essence the life story of a person remains open-ended until the end. Colville *et al.* (1999) argue that as rhetoric is always involved in the process of sensemaking the sense that is made is a matter of words and a representation of reality and not reality itself. According to Taylor (1999:527) "...we understand and make sense of the world as stories."

The themes which have emerged from the research journey I have been involved in are the result of the co-creative sensemaking relationships my participants and I were engaged in with each other. In order to set the scene and provide the context, I draw on the Tamara metaphor Boje (1995) applied in describing stories which emerged from his research of the Disney Enterprise. In *Tamara*-land, presented as a stage play, a dozen characters present their stories before a moving audience. The audience is divided into

small groups who move between rooms and floors to co-create the stories that appeal to them the most. As the audience selects the characters they want to follow, they will experience a different set of stories from another audience who selected a different sequence of characters. As the action is simultaneous and taking place in different rooms and floors and enacted by different characters, no audience is able to follow all of the stories. Boje (1995) posits that the *Tamara* metaphor demonstrates the multiplicity of stories we can select which will depend on the history, meaning of events, the locality, prior sequence of the stories as well as the transformation of the characters as they enact the stories of their particular characters.

The following diagram depicts the research journey I have been and a description of my approach follows.

Figure 4.1 – The Research Journey



The characters who have been involved in my research story were all students on two part time programmes offered by the Business School of the University of Sunderland. The programmes included an MA in Coaching for which I am the programme leader and which numbered twelve students plus two cohorts from a bespoke corporate leadership programme, each programme numbering 14-16 students. The programmes form part of a suit of programmes I have designed and which I deliver to some of our corporate clients within the Business School. The participants on the leadership

programmes are from a range of management positions, from middle to senior management. The students from this programme were all employees from the Public Sector drawn from one Local Authority, an NHS Trust and a local Housing Association. At least half of the students knew each other although they may not have impacted on each other on a day-to-day basis. In order to secure a place on the programme, each student had to go through an application process with their respective employers. They were perceived as the next generation of leaders and the programme was seen as one element of their personal development journey as future leaders. There was therefore an expectation that they would engage fully in the learning journey and an assumption that they were keen to learn and develop.

Students who enrol on the MA in Coaching come mainly from two groups. Firstly, there are the experienced or aspiring coaches seeking to further their knowledge of coaching and gaining accreditation and secondly managers interested in developing a coaching approach to their management and leadership styles and to support an introduction of a coaching culture within their respective organisations. A commonality between the two programmes is that they are both delivered on a part time basis with the management programmes normally delivered once a month for one day. The coaching programme is also delivered once a month, but over two days, normally over the weekend. Delivery for both programmes took place at the Business School Campus. Students from both programmes can be identified as adult, work-based learners and a common thread of both programmes is that each

student is supported by a number of coaching sessions as part of their respective programmes. The coaching support is provided by qualified, practicing coaches.

There were three main characters in the various plays enacted who were involved in a longitudinal study for the duration of their programme, which included analysis of assessments, videos, learning logs and follow up conversations. The data was collected over a period 18 months which allowed me to engage with the data according to the hermeneutic tradition, by journeying through the hermeneutic circle and continually reviewing the data over a period of time. As suggested by Dirkx (Dirkx, *et al.*, 2007) transformative learning involves the process whereby the learner explores her own identity through the integration of experiences in the outer world, as well as experiences of text and subject matter and its impact on the inner world. As researcher it allowed me to reflect on the meaning revealed by the data. By following the hermeneutic framework, which suggests the circling of numerous sources of data as proposed by Dirkx (Dirkx, *et al.*, 2007), it afforded my research journey with rigour in keeping with the hermeneutic traditions.

All three participants in the longitudinal study were students on the MA in Coaching and they are Tracey, George and Tony and I introduce them as follows. As part of the programme the students completed an MBTI

diagnostic and the profiles supported some of the characteristics and behaviours observed by the characters as described below.

Tracey

Tracey is an accountant by profession who has run her own business for a number of years and which has involved working with individuals in establishing business plans and problem solving issues related to their businesses. Tracey is incredibly hard working with a very strong work ethic and committed to doing the best she can which reflects her MBTI preference for sensing and thinking. It was always apparent from her participation, contribution and assignments just how much effort she had put into producing these. She recognises this and describes herself as logical, down to earth and very practical; a thinker rather than a feeler. It is also true to say that she set very high standards for herself as well as her fellow students as is expected of the thinking preference. It meant that she at times felt frustrated with others in the group who did not share her sense of commitment.

Tony

Tony on the other hand was the entertainer of the group and with a clear extroverted preference supported by a dominant intuitive style, which reflects his creative strategic thinking. Due to his high level of intelligence and effortless ability to debate and articulate his thoughts and ideas externally, he appeared to come well prepared to sessions. He is also quick

witted and pepper his challenges and debates with highly amusing anecdotes and quips. I often mused just how much the comedian act was a mask behind which he hid his true self. I am sure Tony would agree with me that he came along for 'the laugh' and the companionship of others and was an outright cynic of coaching at the beginning. His style in general is to challenge and question any new ideas, which reflects his extroverted thinking preference, until he has worked through whether it has any value or not. He was therefore the one who constantly challenged and questioned which, of course, meant his fellow students had to think deeply about the subjects to provide counter arguments when they disagreed and which supported their learning.

Of all the students on the MA programme, I would suggest he probably gained the most from the programme personally. I paired him up with a seasoned and experienced coach who is used to working at very senior levels in both the public and private sector. His coach also had the intellectual and academic ability to successfully field the challenges I knew Tony would subject him to. His extroverted preference means Tony is very transparent and vocal with his opinions and feelings and it was a remarkable experience to observe the transformation of Tony as he engaged, unwillingly at first, with the programme. For Tony it was not the tools or techniques that had an impact on him, but the philosophical challenges the programme exposed them to and the sessions on Critical Theory and Existentialism in the words of Tony, "blew him away". He was determined to remain a cynic at the start

of the programme and the transformation clearly took him and others by surprise. The sessions with his coach and his own coaching sessions with his coachees reinforced his change in attitude.

George

Finally, there is George. He came from the private sector and worked as a business manager for one of the main high street banks and became the head of their Training and Development Department before taking redundancy. George was devastated to discover that he appeared to be much more of an introvert than he thought. He had always imagined himself to be an extrovert and he was truly upset at this discovery and in his words, "having a real sulk" and somewhat aggressive in his rejection of the outcome. It provided very rich material for debate and discussions and how they would deal with a similar situation with a client. It was apparent from his behaviour that it was accurate. An example was observing a video recording of a coaching session where he was being coached, the time he took reflecting on the questions before sharing his thoughts or feelings was quite significant.

The process of introspection also revealed to him his thinking preference. As part of his role, George had conducted many coaching sessions with colleagues from different areas of the bank and in a style he termed "career coaching", particularly supporting others in their career transition. George felt that the coaching he had done was what he termed, "functional" and aimed at specific outcomes and goals and did not include the personal

development of the coachees. His style of coaching revealed to him his thinking preference and a possible avoidance of the opposite continuum, namely that of feeling. George was very engaged with the programme and keen to experience his own personal development and reflection on where he was on his own journey. He immersed himself in the programme and his learning log, in particular, demonstrated the personal reflections he had engaged in.

The scenes my participants and I engaged in included 18 interviews as well as interviews with three of the coaches involved in the work-based programmes. I also interviewed three professional coaches and held a focus group with 16 work-based students who received coaching support as part of their programme of learning. There is no specific reason for the number of participants interviewed, videos, assignments of learning logs interpreted other than the participants were all students who had experienced coaching as part of their respective programmes. Furthermore, from a practical perspective these participants were willing to become involved in my research project. If I had more or less students, the numbers would have reflected that.

4.6 Data Collection

As part of the sensemaking process I selected a mixed method approach for my data collection, which included informal discussions, interviews,

analysis of learning logs as well as videos of coaching. There are a number of reasons why I have used this approach. Firstly, I suggest that it goes some way in balancing the possible position of power I have in relation to my respondents. Secondly, I am of the opinion that it has given me a much richer understanding of the experiences of my participants. Thirdly, as the data were collected from students on various programmes over an 18 month time period, it also provided me with the opportunity of a longitudinal study with the three characters introduced above. This allowed the stories to emerge over time and through the different methods I was able to revisit the themes from different perspectives. Finally, the hermeneutic approach has its traditions originally in an investigation of texts, which in recent years have included other forms of data. In this research project the texts included learning logs and assignments.

Furthermore, to be true to a phenomenological approach it required me to access as many data sources as was feasible to get an in depth understanding of the subjective coaching experiences of my participants. Instead of gathering superficial data from a larger group of respondents, I selected a longitudinal study which afforded me with the opportunity of generating a deeper understanding of the subjective meaning of coaching to a smaller number of participants. The meaning making of the phenomena provided me with greater depth as opposed to breadth. To enhance the credibility of the research, I employed participant validation as suggested by Bryman & Bell (2007) by feeding back to a group of participants the themes that my

interpretations of their stories have revealed. From the feedback received it would appear that my interpretations were largely congruent with the stories conveyed by the participants and no substantial rewriting of the interpretive chapters was necessary.

4.6.1 Informal Data

Apart from the empirical data I collected, it is also worth reflecting on informal and personal experiences that have influenced my thinking and shaped the subsequent data collection process. As discussed earlier the hermeneutic tradition argues that the research will be influenced by the hunch or hunches with which the researcher will embark on the research journey. My hunches and pre-understandings are the result of being a practicing coach and educator. I do not perceive this experience as tarnishing or skewing the data, instead I am of the opinion that it has added a depth to the data collection as well as the story I have selected to tell from the stories offered by my participants. As suggested earlier, I am part of the system and therefore give an insider's account of the system. Constructionism states that a different group of participants would have given a different account of their experiences in the same way that a different researcher would have selected different stories and interpretations from the data. According to the hermeneutic tradition this is to be expected. Furthermore, if I was so analyse the data now,

I may very well tell a story different from the one revealed through my data.

In keeping with the hermeneutic traditions the emergence of the themes as defined in the following chapter is the result of my immersion in the subject and the various forms of data as outlined above. The process started with the research I conducted with student groups as outlined in the Introductory Chapter and which established my initial hunch as to the process of coaching. The discussions with students and coaches, both formal and informal, have all contributed to the aspects of coaching I have selected to focus on. A flow chart is introduced below to visualise the journey which has resulted in the data revealed by my participants.

4.6.2 Interviews

"The interview is a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening." (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:633). The authors go on to suggest that a constructionist approach requires openness and emotional engagement which is developed over a long term relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Burgess (1984:107) states that, "… in any project involving unstructured interviews, the relationship between the researcher and those who are researched is crucial." There are different types of interviews which

will vary on the continuum from structured to unstructured. I have taken an unstructured approach to my interviews, which I believe has allowed me to get a much greater sense of the coaching stories and experiences as lived by my interviewees or characters. I am also of the opinion that an unstructured approach is more aligned with my philosophical approach to research.

In Chapter 2 I discussed at length the power of dialogue and its application to coaching. With the notable exception of Brockbank and McGill (2006) and Cox, *et al.* (2010) who make reference to dialogue, I also identified a gap in the literature and the absence of recognising the coaching conversation as being akin to dialogue. The interviews and focus groups were approached from the assumptions of dialogue allowing meaning of the subjective experiences of my respondents to emerge through the telling of their stories. The process of dialogue is reflective by nature which facilitates the emerging of stories through challenge and questioning. According to van Manen (1990) the hermeneutic interview serves to keep the questions open. Furthermore, I mentioned at the outset that constructionism is aligned with my research philosophy as discussed in Chapter 2, narrative is also a fundamental assumption of transformative adult learning as well as being a significant part of dialogue. In the discussion of sensemaking it is also perceived as key in the process. The dialogue I engaged in with my respondents

reflects the co-constructive aspect of meaning or sensemaking of the phenomena of coaching.

The power of telling one's story allows the participant to create meaning from their experiences of the phenomena they engage in within the world. As stated by Brendel (2009:3) "...narratives have been championed as meaning-making devices by pre-eminent adult learning scholars and introduce studies that support the notion of utilizing narratives as a lever for transformative learning." Brendel (2009) continues and suggests that narrative is a personal account or story that brings meaning to bear on a given situation. In a study carried out by Brendel (2009:33) researching the value of a storytelling approach in medicine, he supports my argument that the reflective practice of storytelling can be achieved in different ways, namely: "The use of reflective journals in these qualitative studies seems to provide a safe space through which individuals may enhance or modify their view of self and their environment." In summary, the phenomena reveal itself through the stories and texts of the research data.

According to Elliott (2005) there are issues of power within the interviewing situation and cautions the interviewer to be aware of biases which may influence the responses by the interview. Upon reflection, I question whether any interview could be totally

unstructured as the very reason for the interview is to invite an opinion or sharing of experiences related to a particular subject matter. A further question I reflected on earlier is whether the researcher through her questioning may lead the participants in their replies. I argue that one way of addressing this is to ask questions for the purpose of understanding rather than persuading. I support this by drawing on the analysis of sensemaking, outlined by the seven characteristics defined by Weick, and suggest that the questions I asked were part of the collective sensemaking process I engaged in with my participants. I also refer to the literature review and the explanation of dialogue vs conversation and suggest that the interviews were conducted in the spirit of dialogue which is approached from a desire to gain understanding; not to persuade or impose a particular perspective.

4.6.3 Documents

In addition to the analysis of the three students I followed longitudinally as the programme leader for the programmes, it was also my responsibility to be the first marker on a number of the assignments which required the student to reflect on their learning and development, including the contribution from their coaching experiences. Each of the students on all three of the programmes produced a learning log as well as a number of different assignments.

Although not all of these documents formally shaped the themes that have emerged from my analysis from the interviews, they have contributed informally to the discussions and debates over the 18 month period. As discussed above, storytelling is a process of meaning making and is not limited to the oral tradition only and stories can be told through the reflective practice of learning logs or even assignments, which has the power to facilitate critical and reflective thinking (Brendel, 2009). Each of the students on the MA in Coaching also produced a number of video tapes of their coaching sessions and 24 of these video sessions contributed to the overall stories.

4.6.4 Focus Groups

I held a focus group with the cohort on the second leadership programme and as with the interviews, the focus was the same. I also carried out a further focus group with a coach and student following the analysis of my data for feedback and discussion. I provided a copy of my analysis to a number of the participants for feedback and comment.

4.6.5 Debates and Discussions

Over the 18 month period I have engaged in various debates and discussions with the above student groups during formal workshops and informal discussion groups. I also conduct a monthly supervision session with coaches and all of these formal and informal debates and discussions although not recorded, have contributed to the richness and depth of the data I have collected.

4.7 Storytelling as Method of Analysis

I selected narrative and storytelling as my preferred method of analysis, engaging in a retelling of the stories relayed to me by my participants in order to develop an understanding of their experiences as lived by them. My role as a narrator is therefore to hold together, and in a social constructionist manner, construct a collective story of transformative learning and coaching. A substantial discourse in narrative as a research methodology has evolved over the last twenty years (Abbott, 1990, 1992; Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997; Mishler, 1995; Riessman, 1993; Elliott, 2005). Narrative is used to "organise a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole." (Elliott, 2005:3). This resonates with the hermeneutic need for understanding the parts in relation to the whole and discussed in Chapter 3. The narrative approach draws on a history through which philosophers and scientists endeavour to understand the ways we come to know what we know. According to Bruner

(1991) it is underpinned by a key assumption that reality is constructed as a story which social actors are constantly rewriting through a collective process.

I support the notion put forward by Cunliffe (2008) who suggests that what the researcher selects will determine how she interprets and make sense of the data. Conducting research in any human endeavour makes it complex and difficult to observe, especially when dealing with subjectivity. In such research Weick (1999b) argues that we draw on creative approaches such as metaphors, pictures and maps to help grasp the meanings that emerge. Gabriel (1991) suggests that stories are more than mere sources of data and instead offers theoretical lenses and methodological approaches. Hence, narrative analysis is one of the most appropriate methods for interpreting the data, particularly as storytelling has a long association with learning and knowledge sharing (Allan *et al.*, 2002; Schreyögg and Koch, 2005; Reissner, 2008).

The history of storytelling is as rich and varied as the history of mankind and perceived as the most widely used means of communication (Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 1993; Riessman, 1993). Weick and Browning (1986) suggest that storytelling combines perceived facts with emotions, ideas, values and norms. It is through the telling of our stories that we are we able to organise events, thereby establishing coherence (Becker, 1997; Linde, 1993). It makes the communication of abstract ideas and behaviours

possible, creating shared expectations and interpretation (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993, Conle, 2000). The narrative paradigm advocates that people come to know what they know by telling stories of personal experiences in different settings. Making sense of the coaching and learning experiences of my interviewees is achieved through ongoing dialogue with the data. "Sensemaking is about continuation, journeys rather than destinations, and normalizing." (Weick, 2001:176). This is an assumption shared by numerous authors who perceive narratives as a fundamental process of the meaning making humans engage in (Bruner, 1991; Ricoeur, 1991, Lämsä and Sintonen, 2006). If sensemaking is ongoing, the collective story I tell will therefore always be incomplete and open to future deconstruction and reconstruction.

There is the darker side to storytelling and numerous authors perceive storytelling as having the capacity to be used to exert power, manipulate, distort and abuse (Gabriel, 2004; Lapp and Carr, 2008). As researcher I have to be mindful of issues of power and bias and it could be argued that the position I held in relation to my respondents was one of power. However, I argue that the focus of my research is on learning from exploration rather than learning from exploitation. Furthermore, in the hermeneutic tradition as researcher I am part of the research process and therefore not detached from it. My research philosophy, as discussed in Chapter 3, is clearly aligned with constructionism and I therefore argue that one of the significant roles of the researcher is to co-construct the story in partnership with her respondents.

To reduce the risk of imposing power over my respondents I have deliberately employed a mixed methodology for the collection of my data.

According to Reason and Bradbury (2008) the value of engagement with people through storytelling is that it allows new spaces for communication to emerge in which dialogue and development can flourish and draws on many ways of knowing. There are also many suggestions as to what makes a good story (Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 1995; Weick, 1995). I chose an aesthetic approach to storytelling, which according to Taylor, *et al.* (2004:405) is concerned with a particular type of knowledge, "A knowledge of sensation and feeling". The human element is central to the experience and therefore the human aspect of the story, bypassing the critical and logical filters applied in making sense of phenomena, intuitively grasping the meaning of the story.

A central theme in coaching as discussed in Chapter 2 is for the coachee to create greater self-awareness. Through the telling of her story, the coachee becomes aware of who she is by tapping into parts of herself possibly hitherto hidden from view. As Sparrowe (2005:420) puts it, "individuals interpretively weave a story uniting the disparate events, actions, and motivations of their life experiences - much as novelists enliven their characters through the plot." Through the use of stories, the coachee is also able to make sense of and experiment with an alternative past, present and

future. Storytelling also allows the coachee to understand how their story is influenced by the many stories of others they are interconnected with.

I do not seek to discover whether the stories told by my characters reveal an objective, external truth. This is supported by Bruner (1990) who posits that the objective of an argument is to convince others of its truth and thereby providing formal and empirical proof. Stories do not offer truth, but instead verisimilitude. In analysing the stories told by my interviewees, I am guided by the advice of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) who suggest that I pay attention to four questions as I embarked on the interpretation of the data, namely:

What do I notice? I describe the broad themes which initially guided me in what to notice

Why do I notice what I notice? This was originally influenced by my hermeneutic hunch

How can I interpret what I notice? I have extensively argued throughout this chapter why the sensemaking model outlined by Weick (1995) is my preferred method through which to interpret the data

How can I know that my interpretation is the right one?

Having assumed a constructionist perspective to my research, I would however challenge the final question. The hermeneutic process argues that there are no right or wrong interpretations and my interpretation is just one

of many possible interpretations. The notion of 'truth' is challenged throughout this study and supported by a postmodernist philosophy and which is in keeping with my overall philosophical research approach.

Van Manen (1988) puts forward a number of different approaches to the process of writing about the research undertaken. The first is the realist tale and possibly the most common type of account, which is identified by the absence of the author from the text. The reason for this is that the researcher is seen as irrelevant to the research process. It also concludes with a single interpretation of the data. In contrast to the realist tale is the confessional tale which endeavours to demystify the process of research through the documenting of the practical aspect of the research process. This approach accepts the author as an active part of the research, revealing the challenges faced by the researcher as she endeavours to piece together a coherent account from what initially seems to be disorder and chaos. Finally, there is the impressionist tale which includes in as much detail and colour the events as experienced by the researcher with the express purpose of allowing the audience to see, hear and feel what the researcher did, evoking a sense of participation by the viewer. The latter is very much in keeping with a hermeneutic approach because the tale is always an unfinished rendition of the story as with every telling one discovers something new and which also reflects my approach. This perspective is referenced at and supported by theoretical perspectives introduced earlier.

Language is the vehicle through which my characters revealed their stories. Berger and Luckmann (1991) suggest that language allows the individual to categorise experiences and assign meaning to those experiences, not only for the individual, but also for those with whom she engages through numerous relationships. "The way language is structured therefore determines the way that experience and consciousness are structured." (Burr, 1995:35). The context within which language is employed is as important and multi-layered as the language itself. Gergen and Gergen (2008) lend their support to this argument by challenging the presumption that language is able to map the world of human behaviour. Instead they argue that it is a device that allows groups of people to create shared meaning and understanding. Mumby and Clair (1997) posit that through ongoing action-oriented communication different social realities are produced.

Gergen (2001) suggests that one view of language is that it is a vehicle that transmits and reflects the truth of the world as it is and reflects a deep rooted assumption that language is able to convey truth. However, he goes on to argue that language in itself does not represent any pictures or maps as to what constitutes reality; it achieves meaning through its use and through the exchange within human interactions. Furthermore, he argues that without a language through which people express their internal states and characteristics, social life as we know it would not exist. Adding to the debate on meaning, Sim (2001) argues that it is transitory and constantly evolving and changing and has no permanence or substance. What Sim

(2001) emphasises is the joint authorship of meaning between the originator and that of the recipient. Words or symbols created by an author are suspended and only assume meaning when the reader engages in the co-creative act of assigning meaning to the words. The text therefore has inherent a multiplicity of meaning. According to Linstead (1994) the meaning a reader assigns to text is influenced by their awareness of other texts and cultural forms. Narrative research also attends to the richness of social life and interaction, particularly symbolic meaning (Gabriel, 2004), expectations, and the quality of fantasy (Taylor *et al.*, 2004). These issues are often hidden within the sentences of the story of a participant, but tend to be central in gaining an in-depth understanding of the participant, their experiences and issues. The multiplicity of meaning reflects the beliefs of a postmodernist perspective which argues for the little voices as opposed to a metanarrative as put forward by Lyotard (1979) and which I have introduced earlier.

I also draw on the notion of storytelling as a process of sensemaking, which aptly describes the coaching process; a process for the coachee to make sense of their world. In the same manner I, as the researcher, make sense of the stories told by my participants. As discussed above, there are many different ways of analysing the emerging stories I have collected from my participants and from the many I have chosen a thematic approach as the most appropriate and as King (2004) suggests it provides a clear link between the conclusions and the stories. I could also have opted for a more

structured approach and coded the data through the use of NVivo software. However, I chose to focus on the themes emerging from the stories that the participants tell themselves and others about their experiences of coaching and learning. King (2004) suggests that it is essentially about establishing links between different themes that dominate the story in order to understand what is going on in the overall story of the life of the participant.

4.8 The Researcher as Narrator

In analysing the narratives and stories revealed by the various participants, it is necessary to consider the researcher as narrator. According to Conle, (2000) it is almost inevitable that autobiographical components will find their way into the collective story I tell, despite the fact that the focus is on the experience of others. One would expect the narrator and the participant to become involved in joint meaning-making through their collective involvement in the story. Elliott (2005) argues that as the researcher working on the interpretation of the stories told by my interviewees, I also become one of the narrators that have to ultimately persuade my readers of the story I have told. McDrury and Alterio (2001) suggest that revealing what happened, how it happened and why allows the reader to position their own experiences in relation to the interpretation of the story.

Cunliffe, *et al.* (2004) clearly argues that the researcher as narrator is not an objective observer or recorder. Instead she is an active participant in the

unfolding story by weaving her personal stories with those of her participants. Heron and Reason (2008) go further and label it as a form of co-operative inquiry in which all participants work together; subjects as well as researchers. This reinforces the underlying constructionism of meaning argued throughout the thesis. Everyone is involved collectively in making sense of the experiences and drawing conclusions together, working through cycles of action and reflection. Consciously involving my participants in the process of sensemaking and telling a collective story is also one way of compensating for possible issues of power and addressing the question as to whose story is being told; that of the narrator or the participants?

Every story has a narrator; the storyteller. So it is with telling the research story. The storyteller is powerful in their ability to influence how the story will turn out. The narrator has to heed the potential and implicit relationship between power and knowledge (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). The potential weakness of storytelling as a legitimate methodology for the analysis of research data may therefore be open to the challenging question of whose story is being told. I have dealt with this by involving the participants in agreeing with and sharing the themes that have emerged from their collective story. The participants have therefore shared with me as researcher the power of determining the meaning we have collectively derived as to the contribution of coaching to adult learning.

4.9 Emergent Themes

In explaining the process of analysing the data and the selection of themes, I draw inspiration from van Manen, (1990:7) who suggests that, "Hermeneutic phenomenological research is fundamentally a writing activity [where the] research and writing are aspects of one process". He goes on to argue that the "essential quality of a theme … [is that we] … discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is." (van Manen (1990:107). In determining the themes I engaged in a continual process of re-reading the data and reviewing the coaching sessions captured on video. Having identified the initial themes as described below, the data were again re-read with a view to identifying the stories that might best show each of these themes. It was during this process that I became aware that the initial themes did not adequately capture the meaning from the data which were emerging. This resulted in a reshaping of the themes which became the ones I discuss in the following chapter.

This process of circling through the data is in keeping with the hermeneutic circle which allows the researcher to become attuned with the essential meanings of the phenomena. As Gadamer (1994) suggests, the hermeneutic circling allows the researcher to develop understanding and interpretations of the phenomena through language. This is supported by van Manen (1990) who adds that the hermeneutic circling of the phenomena is an activity of

reading-writing-rereading-rewriting and is critical to the uncovering of the essence of the phenomena. In keeping with the theme of dialogue, as researcher the hermeneutic circling allowed me to engage in dialogue with the data, which allowed the embedded meaning to reveal itself. As Giles (2009) suggests it is through the conversation with the text that understanding emerges for the researcher. I would go further and suggest that the understanding and meanings which emerged is a co-constructed act of meaning between me as researcher, the various forms of data as well as the respondents themselves. Furthermore, the phenomenological process is imbued with moments of intuitive insight that are an essential part of analysis. This is supported by van Manen (1990) who perceives such moments as moments of seeing meaning.

Guided by the framework of sensemaking I began to retrospectively make sense of the stories told by my participants over a period of time. I selected a thematic portrayal as outlined by Moustakas (1994) who suggests that by using phenomenological reflection, themes of the experience will emerge. At the start of the analysis I was guided by my research question namely to determine whether there was a link between coaching and transformative learning as well as the other two elements of the coaching triangle of sensemaking and dialogue which I proposed in Chapter 1. I therefore began to interpret the data using the following as broad themes reflecting the key concepts of adult learning :

- Evidence of collaboration between coach and coachee
- Critical examination of assumptions
- Reflection and examination of self, others and past experience
- Ownership of the learning agenda
- Different levels of learning, ie learning loops
- Ability to identify choices in response and behaviour
- Quality and nature of the coaching conversations
- Elements of sensemaking as described by Weick

As suggested, it was by continually reviewing and reading the data such as the assignments, videos, learning logs and interview transcriptions using the above as cues and colour coding the material according to the above, that these themes evolved into the core themes presented in the following chapter. The process was non-structured and influenced by intuitive reflection and insight as suggested by the hermeneutic circle. The stages in the journey of making sense of the data were often influenced by the participants themselves or through formal and informal discussions. I selected these because of the frequency with which they were referred to by the different participants.

The question as to which themes I selected to focus on was guided by my purpose to gain a better understanding as to what transpires in the black box of coaching. If my focus had been to understand either the inputs or outputs of coaching, I would no doubt have selected different themes such as the

tools and techniques employed by the coaches or the objectives achieved. In keeping with the hermeneutic circle, I have presented the data as emerging themes rather than a chronological account from each participant. My purpose is, as stated, to tell an overall, collective story rather than reflecting the individual stories of the participants separately. A summary of the data and emergent themes are detailed in the following schedule, which identifies the various method of data collection I employed and the final themes which eventually emerged and which is described in detail in the following chapter. In view of the personal nature of some of the data participants revealed about themselves, each participant has been given a pseudonym for the purpose of protecting their identity.

Figure 4.2 – Schedule of Data Collection and Emergent Themes

Interviews – MA Students	**Themes**
Joe	Trust
Tim	Coach as Champion
Tony	Non-Judgemental Challenge
Andy	Sacred Space
George	Reflection
Alan	Ownership
Tracey	Confidence
Ann	Transformative Learning
Sue	
Shirley	

Jan	
Melanie	
Interviews - Leadership Programme 1	
Madge	
Kate	
Stuart	
Dave	
Ellie	
Ross	
Angela	
Interviews – Coaches	
Mike and Mandy (Coaches)	
Richard (Coach)	
Focus Groups	
Student Focus Group (Leadership Programme 2)	
Tim and Bob (Student and Coach)	
Data	
Assignments from MA Students	

Learning Logs from MA Students	
Learning Logs from Leadership Programmes	
MA Dissertations	
24 Video tapes of 1:1 and group coaching sessions	
Informal Data	
Previous research and publications	
Discussions and debates during lectures and workshops	
Personal experience as coach	
Discussions from monthly supervision sessions	
24 One hour video recordings (MA students)	

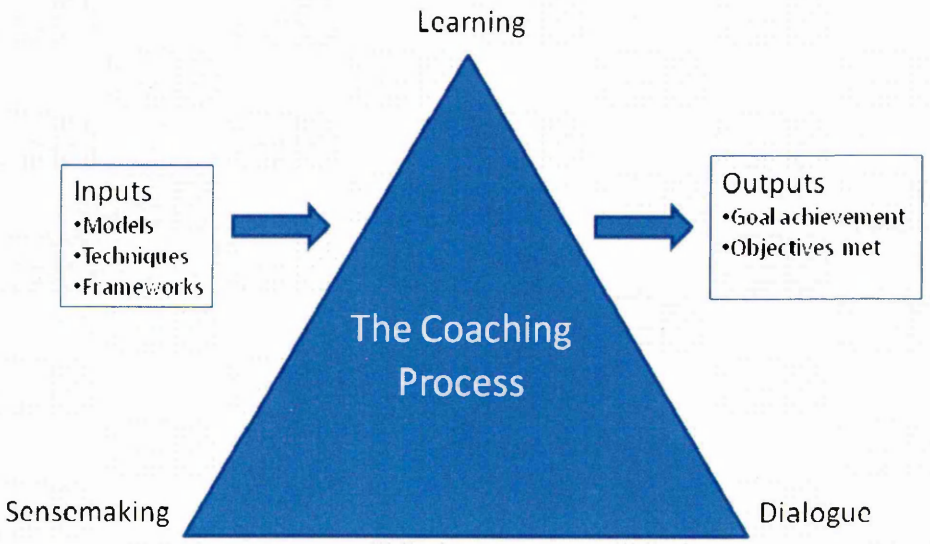
4.10 Evaluation of Research

I am conscious that as a qualitative researcher adopting a constructionist perspective, I am vulnerable to challenges aimed at the notion of multiple realities and therefore seeing multiple stories as merely an attempt in gaining artificial consensus. Furthermore, as stated above, I am aware of the influence I may possibly bring to bear on the interpretation of the data. However, the guiding principle for a qualitative researcher is the rigour with which the process is followed. I have been guided throughout the research process by the framework provided by the hermeneutic circle. Furthermore,

the more I continue to spiral through the hermeneutic circle, the more I discover in the telling and retelling of the stories offered by my participants. For example, at the start of the journey, I was guided by the broad theories of adult learning which reflected the hermeneutic hunch which guided the research journey. However, in time the hermeneutic circling, as discussed above, resulted in the themes which emerged and which are discussed in the following chapter. Garvey and Williamson (2002) eloquently state that narrative research is not about reflecting reality in a concrete sense, nor is it about fact or providing proof. Instead, narrative research is the creative act of artistic interpretation. It is about the meaning the participant, narrator and listener create collectively. Cunliffe, *et al.* (2004:262) refers to narratives as, "spontaneous acts of meaning-making." It is through the telling of stories that we communicate not only with others, but also with ourselves thereby facilitating the sensemaking process.

In Chapter 1 I introduced my initial hunch of coaching as a black box and defined as a triangle with interacting elements of sensemaking, learning and dialogue which, according to an input and output perspective of coaching, convert the inputs of coaching to measurable outcomes. Based on the review of the literature and defining my approach to research, I suggest an amended version of the triangle with my focus being on understanding the process in the middle as follows.

Figure 4.3 - Amended Coaching Triangle



As to the descriptions of the triangle I have revised their positions and placed learning at the top. I perceive the sensemaking through dialogue supporting the learning. I have also clearly separated the coaching process into three distinct parts; inputs, conversion and outputs. The coaching literature would suggest that the majority of coaching interventions draw on various models and techniques with which to achieve some form of output which is often determined at the outset of the coaching contract.

4.11 Ethical Considerations Using a Narrative Approach

Any participation of human subjects in research needs to be viewed from an ethical perspective, considering the possible impact of the research on those

involved. In this particular research project the relationship the researcher establishes with the research subjects continues throughout the interpretation stages of the research. As mentioned above, narrative research perceives the identity of the individual to be inextricably linked with the stories they reveal. These stories are therefore not merely descriptive, but constitutive of the self. Furthermore, Elliott (2005) argues that there are elements of both research and therapy in narrative studies which puts a moral obligation on the researcher in the way the research is conducted and the data analysed. Not only may the interviewing process have an effect on the interviewee, but of equal importance is the potential effect of the interpretation of the narratives. There is also the important consideration of anonymity and confidentiality of the stories relayed by the interviewee. Through the retelling of the stories, it is imperative to protect the identity of the individuals. The converse may, of course, also be true as the individual might welcome the opportunity to have their stories known.

Then there is the question as to who has the authority to legitimate and validate new knowledge that may emerge. Narrative knowledge is reliant on a new understanding of subjectivity and which does not lend itself to the validation process of inductive research. Elbaz-Luwisch (1997) suggests that a good story is judged on what it brings to light. There is also potentially a darker side to storytelling. Narrative research by its very nature requires reflection and understanding of the context, values and emotions which

leads to the issue of the potential power and influence the interviewer may have over the interviewee.

The participant may feel compelled to tell their story in the way they think the researcher wants to hear it or stories may be marginalised or aspects of it dismissed or suppressed. 'Each telling presents one possible version of the action in question.... ' (Schafer, 1992:xvi) and it is a question of 'trustworthiness not truth' (Schafer, 1992:65). One of the ways I have tried to avoid this in my own research is through a multi-method approach to identify any common themes revealed by a variety of stories as described in more detail in Chapter 2.

4.12 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that sensemaking is a valid methodology through which to make sense of the research data I have collected. I described sensemaking based on one of the leading proponents of sensemaking namely Weick (1995) and his seven characteristics of sensemaking. As my research journey progressed and I became more familiar with the work of Weick (1995) I concluded that not only does sensemaking provide a framework to research, but that it also provides a structure through which to understand the co-constructive relationship between the coach and coachee. Together the coach and coachee make sense

of emergent issues within the coaching space, as identified by my respondents.

McDrury and Alterio (2001) support my choice of storytelling as a method of data analysis as it reflects the belief of hermeneutics that the story is never fully told. With each telling of the story the narrator is given the opportunity to reflect on previous meanings and interpretations, allowing new insights to emerge. A motivation for applying a sensemaking model in analysing the stories of my participants is that the underlying assumption of interpretation is inherent within the hermeneutic cycle. Instead of seeking to establish law-like statements drawn from the data, a narrative approach seeks to understand the reflexive individual and how such individuals constitute themselves through the use of language. As, Bruner (1991) suggests stories are a transparent window on reality without imposing a specific shape on it.

I went on to suggest that not only is storytelling an accepted methodology in the analysing of research data, but it is also a powerful element of the coaching experience due to its sensemaking function. Furthermore, each new audience will contribute their own interpretation through the collective act of sensemaking. In the following chapter I offer a discussion and analysis of the themes that have emerged from the data I have collected and which I outlined in detail above.

5

Data Analysis

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present the themes which have emerged from the stories told by my respondents in its various forms and identified in the previous chapter. Narrative researchers can potentially focus on an endless number of issues and my research is no different. The hermeneutic circling of the data I have engaged in resulted in the following themes emerging. The themes are the result of the stories shared by my participants from the numerous forms of data that I have collected and described in the previous chapter. As Giles (2009) suggests it is through the conversation with the text that understanding emerges for the researcher. I included voices of certain participants through direct quotes recorded during the interview or taken from their assignments and learning logs where these are a direct link to the theme identified.

I suggested in Chapter 1 that I am interested in understanding the black box of coaching and not necessarily the inputs such as models and techniques or specific outputs such as goals or objectives. If the purpose of my research had a different focus, I would possibly have selected different themes such as an analysis of the tools and techniques used in coaching and/or the quality of the output of coaching and its sustainability, the difference or relationship

between coaching and counselling, the list is possibly endless. The result would have been a very different story.

5.2 Emergent Themes

As revealed in the review of the literature, there is a limited focus on the importance of what constitutes the coaching relationship. As identified earlier, what has emerged in my research is the co-constructive nature of the coaching relationship between the coach and coachee and although associated with the literature on adult learning, it is not identified in the coaching literature. Without exception my participants identified certain aspects or facets of the relationship between the coach and coachee as being a necessary part of their positive experience of coaching. Furthermore, these aspects are seen as key in contributing to their personal learning and development. The following themes emerged from the data in different ways as demonstrated by the personal stories revealed through the quotes.

Theme 1 - Trust

> *"I suppose just thinking about it, I think a lot of people may be, may be, do they not have people they can trust, or is there not someone in their life, but there are a lot of people I think that exist in their family and their work, but do they have that person that they can be that honest with and trust and there is*

no come back." (Shirley)

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 reveals the perceived value of trust as an important aspect of the coaching relationship. Without trust the 'coaching conversations' referred to by numerous authors will not be possible (De Haan and Burger, 2005; Garvey *et al.*, 2009). Cope (2004) argues that one of the key aspects of a successful coaching relationship is the ability of the coach to develop a high level of trust with the coachee. The presence of trust is also a key aspect of a humanistic approach to coaching (Stober, 2006). As with many journeys, the coaching journey also takes the participants into the unknown which may feel scary, and at the same time messy, as described by some of my participants. The trust the coach and coachee establish provides the comfort and support for the coachee to continue on this unknown journey of discovery. Some participants also perceived trust to legitimise the time, space and commitment of the coachee to the process and, offering the support to enter the unknown. As discussed in the literature review, O'Broin and Palmer (2007) draw parallels with the therapeutic relationship which suggests that the maintenance of trust is vital if the relationship is to continue. The trust experienced by the coachee could be part of the contractual relationship between the coach and coachee, as one of my participants commented:

"It may be easier for the coachee to trust their coach,
you know, because something formal has been arranged

and you've signed a sort of contract and it has been explicitly stated that the confidentiality, you know, you don't have to spend years getting to know someone like you would with a friend and build the trust." *(Shirley)*

A contributing factor in establishing the sense of trust is the fact that the coach is independent from most aspects of their lives, both professionally and personally. Very often the coach is someone they have not met before the start of the coaching sessions. The trust in the relationship is also seen as being necessary for the creation of what the participants all referred to as the special space or place created within the coaching relationship and which Tracey also referred to in her learning log:

"It seems like that as a result of the trust and understanding in the relationship that it creates a special place or space."

The stories of the participants suggest that the trust they felt within the coaching environment was generated by their coach. This resonates with the person centred approach of Carl Rogers who suggest that if the therapist is congruent with who she is it allows others to experience a sense of trust in her as a person. It would therefore appear that the intention with which the coach approaches the coachee and the coaching environment is crucial in creating that sense of trust and acceptance. The fact that my participants perceived the trust and special nature of the coaching environment to be due

to the way the coach conducts herself raises a significant issue of responsibility on behalf of the coach. This finding reinforces what the literature suggested that the way the coach shows up in the coaching sessions will determine the tone of the sessions. Such a responsibility highlights the need for coaches to be continually engaged in their own development and supervision and which the literature would suggest, coaches do not take seriously enough.

Theme 2 – Coach as Champion

> *"I think that's what it is, it is not just talking about yourself, but it is the opportunity to bring somebody else into your world. I would go further and add that what makes that possible for a coachee to allow the coach into their world is that they feel that the coach is there as their champion and will not be sitting in judgement of them. Yeah, and how many times do people say to you, oh I know what you're thinking or how you feel, but actually in the coaching scenario you are bringing somebody into your body into your world so that they absolutely know what you're thinking and what you're feeling so then you don't feel stupid about saying certain things, you don't feel weak if you say that really upset me because that*

person feels that you're upset because if they are doing it properly and really listen they are there in your head and the person sitting in the chair is just a shell, they're in your head so you end up talking to yourself really after a while."

(Tracey)

The general theme, although expressed differently by different participants, is that the coach is seen as the champion of the coachee. The coach is there to cheer the coachee on and to hold the dream on her behalf until she is able to realise her potential for herself. From her own perspective as both a coachee and a coach of others, Tracey shared with me during an interview the importance for the coach to enter the world of the coachee:

"I do think it is important in the relationship to try and get into tune with the kind of world that they exist in as well as the thing to try and avoid sharing your own opinions and experience and forcing it upon them, instead helping them to understand where they are on their journey and where their level of thinking might take them. I think it is very important to try and exist in the world that is their world and understand it, hmm (long silence), and that is more or less difficult, depending on the individual. So it is two things, it is

the world that impacts on them to understand that and then it is the relationship side to get inside to try and understand who they are." (Tracey)

Another participant and student on the coaching programme offered a similar sentiment in terms of the importance to understand her coachee:

"Getting inside her head was really important and I had to work really hard and it was the storytelling that I used a lot, so you know, tell me a story..." (Melanie)

The coach as your champion raises an interesting point. The one-to-one nature of the coaching means it is a unique experience for every coachee, for the very reason that you have two unique individuals that will collectively construct an experience that is impossible to reproduce. This is borne out by George who reflected the following during the interview. It also appears that he was making the comparison between the coaching he experienced as part of the coaching programme and his earlier career coaching experiences:

"For me I think it is the fact that it is customised, because if you compare it with things like training that is just sheep dipping and it assumes that everybody is at the same level, everybody is the

same and it doesn't cope with the fact that everybody is different and that everybody is going to be at a different level whereas coaching is so customised, it is for that person, it is specific to them, it is their ideas, it is their agenda and it gives them time to think."

(George)

Another participant, Joe, a senior manager in the private sector also mentioned in his learning log that as a result of his experiences of coaching, the benefit was passed on to the team he manages and which he discussed further during the interview:

"It's probably just being more of a case of, it links with what you said about thinking, I suppose I just started thinking, reflecting, which I probably didn't do much before. I had the internal dialogue everybody has, but I never stopped to smell the air. I was very task orientated and I'm not saying it has been an instant change, because I will continue to do it, but, hmm, I can just see the benefit of it, you know, and I don't know, it just makes me feel good about, hmm, it's my team as well, my team are benefiting from it as well. You can see they're starting

to see the benefits from it as well. I don't know, but the odd comments you get about you've handled it well, because they thought I would go nuts or get pissed off or whatever like that, but now I either reflect on it, give them a decision then or give them the power to make a decision and I think they know I really mean it. I don't know, it wasn't just one thing, I don't think."

(Joe)

A fundamental principle for the coach to bear in mind is that the agenda and therefore the power of choice rest with the coachee. As discussed in Chapter 2, Wilson, (2007) perceives that the agenda of the intervention is driven by the coachee who therefore has the ultimate say in the outcome of the process. I would argue that the space and relationship referred to by participants enable them to reclaim their own personal power, which in turn makes them feel capable of making the choices and decisions they consider to be of value and relevance to them.

Theme 3 - Non-Judgemental Challenge

"I couldn't understand how you couldn't apply judgment and advice and that clicked for me in the second session. It is not about you the coach

changing the coachee, doing more like the coach or to agree with the coach, you can't do that. People have no right to change other people. What you do is to free them to change themselves or not as they wish to do. And when you start doing that you automatically start doing it for yourself."

(Tony)

During one of our discussions, Tony shared his initial cynicism in the ability of the coach in being able to be non-judgemental.

As identified in the literature, Chapter 2, a person-centred approach argues that for an individual to achieve self-actualisation they require the right environment. Such an environment should include an acceptance of the coachee as they are without judgement. Instead, the coach is there to listen and challenge without a personal agenda. This is one of the key tenets of Personal Construct Psychology as put forward by Kelly (1991) as well as that of a humanistic approach (Stober, 2006) and discussed in Chapter 2.

Included in this challenge is the experience that the coach did not offer any solutions or answers for them, but instead offered support in talking them through their issues. A comment from one of the students on the leadership programme was that:

"He sort of helped me to talk my way through them, by just asking probing questions, really and it felt more valuable for it at the end." (Stuart)

The sense of not being judged enables the coachee to talk openly about the things that really matter to her. Once the initial barrier is removed my participants identify a sense of being able to say whatever comes to mind. It also provides the opportunity to talk to someone who listens without any preconceived assumptions of the coachee. Here was someone who was interested in their aspirations from a non-judgemental and independent perspective and whose sole purpose during the session was to encourage different lines of thought and approach to the issues they were facing. A student on one of the leadership programmes summed it up in his log by suggesting:

"I found that really quite liberating and I didn't really expect to." (Dave)

McAdams (1993) and his students had the same experience with participants they had interviewed as part of a research to discover the myths people live by. At the end of the interviews the participants found it rewarding and satisfying having had an opportunity to tell their story to someone whose purpose it was to listen intently without judgement, even if it meant shedding tears in the process. A number of participants also commented

during the interview or revealed in their learning logs that they learnt an awful lot about themselves and that the coaching experience made them think about things they would not normally spend time reflecting on. My participants concurred and added that it is comforting for the coachee to receive a strong sense of encouragement from the coach and the message that it is fine to express her own thoughts and ideas. Furthermore, it is also acceptable to end up in a different place from where she had originally started. The probing questions from the coach are mentioned time and time again and the power it has in challenging assumptions as shared by a coaching student during the interview:

> *"I think it is again going back to the time, the interest in you and the questioning techniques used and the challenging nature of the questioning. So you may not necessarily like every question that they put to you, but when you go away and reflect on it and come back it seems to take you forward with your thoughts or at least allows you to think about why it is you act or behave in a certain way. However, that challenge isn't always comfortable initially. It can be painful, but it is possible because of the support of the coach. You also know that the coach has no agenda other than to support you."(Melanie)*

One participant described it as "tough love." In the coaching relationship the coach seeks to enter the world of the coachee as soon as possible for the purpose of challenging the coachee to explore whether there is another way of thinking about the world. This is not always possible in other relationships for a number of different reasons. One of the key considerations is that it is difficult to find a relationship where the other person challenges from a perspective that has the best interest of the coachee at heart without judgement.

I suggest that many relationships come with an agenda, even in the most loving and caring of relationships there is an agenda as the best is sought for the other person. Although a friend may very well act as a sounding board, having someone listen to you without seeking personal gain or without a personal agenda, is much more liberating. A friend may very well collude with the person and tell her what she wants to hear without challenging her assumptions and points of view. The special nature of the relationship was further described as follows by one of the coaching students:

> *"It is also something about the experience of, it's like a shared moment. It is not intimate, it's like a very special relationship and, you know, now and then there are those wonderful shared moments that nobody else could potentially understand necessarily and maybe it is along those lines, you know between*

the coach and the coachee." (Andy)

The challenge associated with coaching allows coach and coachee to enter into a meaningful relationship that will challenge instead of reinforce the existing views of the world held by the coachee. As discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to transformation, Hargrove (1995) describes transformational coaching as the process which supports the individual to stretch their abilities by altering the context which limits the way they think. This led me to reflect that this process helps to overcome barriers to learning and as one participant on the leadership programme suggests:

> *"Most barriers are self-made. Yeah, there are external barriers, but they are only impenetrable because you only look at them from one particular way and you do need help to see that there is another equally valuable way of looking at it, which may initially cut across what you think is right or wrong or more valuable, but when you keep probing, and coaching can help you do this, OK maybe there is a way forward." (Alan)*

The coach as champion or supporter of the coachee resonates with the person centred approach of Carl Rogers referred to throughout the thesis. One of the key tenets of this approach is the relationship itself between client and therapist as a significant factor in promoting change. What

emerges from the stories shared on the themes discussed so far is that through the supportive nature of the coaching relationship the coachee engages in a process of making sense of her world. What is also consistent with many of the stories is that this would not be possible without the presence of the coach, which suggests a co-constructive relationship. Furthermore, the elements of the relationship identified suggest that the conversations the coach and coachee engage in reflects the elements of dialogue as discussed in Chapter 2.

As I reflect on the comments offered during the interviews, the learning logs and the videos of the coaching sessions, the commitment in supporting the coachee is clearly evident. I am, however, becoming conscious of a question and that is whether the idea of being non-judgemental of the coachee does sometimes prevent the coach from challenging the coachee. It might be that being non-judgemental could be interpreted as being non-critical and as I introduced in Chapter 1 and also in Chapter 2, the influence of the roots of humanistic psychology on coaching is dominated by a focus of the self-actualisation of the coachee (Stober, 2006). On the other hand as suggested in Chapter 1, Lyotard (1979) advocates critical thinking and challenging metanarratives wherever they are found.

Theme 4 - Sacred Space

"It is all about you and you have to get into that space

that it is all about you, but not in a selfish way, but in a self responsibility way." (Melanie)

This theme of space was particularly strongly emphasised by all participants during the interviews and also referred to in other forums such as informal discussions and documents, and the contribution it made to the special nature of the coach/coachee relationship. Southern (2007:329) supports the importance of the relationship by saying: "I have come to understand that my relationship with students is critical to creating the conditions that support transformative learning." My personal experience as a coach supports an assumption of the person centred approach to counselling and introduced which suggests that the intention of the therapist is fundamental to the success of the client relationship. I asked the question of one participant what she thought the value is of coaching to the learning process and she immediately offered the explanation that coaching legitimises the space to think.

From the introduction of the literature in Chapter 2, the experiences referred to as this sacred space reflects the elements identified within dialogue (Bohm, 1992, 1996; Dixon, 1999; Quick and Macik-Frey, 2004). This space is seen as one of the most important elements of transformation as it provides the space in which people can explore what is important to them. As suggested by Bohm (1992) in Chapter 2, dialogue facilitates a shared quest for deeper insight and clarity. The space referred to by my respondents

is defined as a holding space by Gunnlaugson (2007) and suggests that it creates the necessary condition for making dialogue particularly effective in the pursuit of transformative learning. This concept of space was identified by my participants as a key dimension in creating the necessary reflective environment of coaching. One participant referred to it as a "bubble" in which time stood still and where dialogue was possible. It is not a physical space, but a "bubble" or as another participant referred to it as a "sacred space" that facilitates the deep thinking and reflection discussed above.

The space is almost seen as having the ability to slow down time, to allow that time for interaction with the coach for the purpose of looking at particular issues or situations from different angles. Another observation as to the value of this space was identified as by another participant and student on the leadership programme as follows:

> *"Being given that time and space for myself because there aren't many times in your life where someone sits you down, and you can talk with someone that is genuinely interested in you and facilitating some kind of change or simply just listening. So I think for me first of all is defining the time, defining the purpose of it and actually genuinely, actively listening, caring or empathising, but not only that, but comfortable enough to be able to challenge in a way that is going to drive*

some kind of change." (Jan)

She continued with her musings on the value of this space:

> *"I don't think you could ever achieve what the coach and coachee could achieve, because from my own experience, there are a lot of things I have thought about myself, hmm, but it is not until I have verbalised it out there in a proper coaching session that I thought, oh yes! So I think that space with the coach is very important. Within that space you know there aren't any silly questions or silly thoughts, you can voice everything you want and I find that the critical voice in my head is far less active than if I go and have some time out on the beach. So, I think that the coach is absolutely vital in the process of being there, asking challenging questions, digging deeper because I think when you are on your own it's easy to give up and say I don't know why that person drives me around the bend full stop. Whereas if somebody then digs deeper and deeper and looks at it from another angle, you know, you keep at it and the chances of discovering something much, much higher rather than just saying I don't, full stop, I'm giving up now." (Jan)*

However, this process as described by the participant does not seem possible without this safe or sacred space. The space is seen to include things such as the trusting nature of the relationship, the chemistry between the coach and coachee, being nurtured and accepting whilst at the same time being challenged. In her discussions on transformative learning and mentoring, Southern (2007) also refers to the idea of a space in which both the mentor and the learner are able to express their vulnerability. It is not seen as a physical space necessarily, but instead an emotional one, because one can experience the above in a busy coffee shop, surrounded by other people and sounds. It is a space that transcends the physical and as one participant reflected on her experiences of coaching suggested:

> *"No I definitely don't think it has anything to do with the physical space, but I'm not sure how to describe it because I don't think it is spiritual, non-material is not the right word either, I don't quite know how to describe it, but it is definitely not a physical space." (Melanie)*

A number of the participants also suggested that it is a space they can return to in their minds between coaching sessions. The above quote is an example of the holding space referred to earlier. Holding space is seen as a necessary element of transformative learning.

Theme 5 - Opportunity for Reflection

> *"The most effective part of coaching for me is the reflection, thinking about things and also having some help with that reflection. The coach helps you to focus on what is relevant and what isn't relevant." (Richard)*

According to Brockbank and McGill (2006) reflection is necessary for improvement as well as transformation. Kilburg (2002) also argues that the coaching environment provides a structure within which the coachee can safely explore any dimension of her life as time and resources will permit. As discussed above, the space identified by my participants enhances the quality and depth of reflection. The need for and the ability to reflect is identified as a key aspect of transformative learning. As Gunnlaugson (2007) point out, it is an assumption shared by proponents of transformative learning that it is accompanied by reflection. In his article on generative dialogue, Gunnlaugson (2007) identifies the co-constructive nature of dialogue. Every one of the participants echoed the same phrases of how important it is to have the time to talk about things that really affected them and having the opportunity to work through them with someone they have built the trusting relationship with as referred to above. This applies equally to the coachees and the observation and experiences of the practicing coaches.

The opportunity to take time out from daily life and to talk mainly about their personal development and issues that they may face is seen as critical in getting the direction and answers sought. After posing the question to George, during one interview as to what his experience of coaching had been up to the point of asking, he stated that:

> *"The most important aspect for me so far has been the reflection. I'm not naturally a reflective person I think, but what the coaching has done for me with every interaction I've had with people is, hmm, it's not forced reflection its just happened, you know, and it's been deep and it's been meaningful, but it was afterwards I thought, bloody hell, wait a minute because that challenging question had stayed with me and whilst I hadn't thought there must be something, just out of the blue it suddenly hit me and I thought I dismissed that and yet it was a major thing in my life and I thought it is bound to have an impact and I'm thinking, well I'm making links with thoughts I'm having during sessions such as MBTI and what my values are, etc and I put that together with the challenge you'd given me and the bolt from the blue that came a few days later. So the most powerful thing for me is that you can't force it, you know, you have a conversation and you just, you*

don't know what's going to come from it and it may be days, weeks and months afterwards that something might come to you. All of these things, kind of, different or what might appear disparate events, reflections and ideas, you start to make links between them. So say for example a conversation I've had with my coach on one particular development and the value it has added, so that's in a little box on its own and then the conversation with you which would appear to be distinct and separate, and then you all of a sudden think, well they're not really separate and you start to make links. I suppose in a roundabout way what I'm saying is the power of that reflection and going back to my earlier comment, it can't be mechanical." (George)

The student went on to reflect that in his opinion, transformational coaching is about what is deep and meaningful to the individual, reflecting on what lies beneath the behaviours; the values and belief and the fact that transformational coaching challenges the coachee to think more deeply about why she does what she does; challenging her frames of reference. In Chapter 2 a review of the transformative literature expressly refers to reflection as an assumption of transformative learning within adults. The transforming of the worldview of the individual is associated with the ability to reflect on the assumptions and beliefs held. Tennant (2005) suggests that

for personal change to occur, it is necessary for the individual to engage in exploration of self, achieved through the use of different methods such as reflection and contemplation. Mezirow (1991) refers to this as critical self-reflection or "soul work" as described by Dirkx (2007). Moore (2005) points out that transformative learning requires the ability of the individual to reflectively transform attitudes, opinions, beliefs and emotional reactions which constitute her meaning scheme. He goes on to suggest that it could be painful or uncomfortable which was also suggested by my respondents. The challenging yet supportive nature of the coaching relationship was discussed earlier.

Furthermore, as suggested by Tracey, quoted below, reflection needs a companion to share it with, someone who can reflect the comments of the coachee back to her. The same is true of transformative learning and according to Mezirow (1990) it does not happen in isolation. It is instead a social affair that requires interaction, debate, and being exposed to alternative realities. The notion of reflection can be seen as the same way that a mirror reflects images back to the observer as Tracey suggests:

> *"I was really surprised at how strong that was. People don't listen to what they're saying, they just say things. So to listen to what you say and have somebody else listen to everything, but then just giving sharp points of reflection back again and if the coach wasn't there and*

it was just a personal self-reflective moment I don't think you can go as deeply into your own thoughts as somebody else can that is listening, you don't verbalise it, it stays internal." (Tracey)

Tracey continued and raised a thought which emerged to her in relation to the deep listening associated with the two-way process of reflection in coaching:

"I think the coaching makes both parties think inward because deep listening does not just happen on the surface, you draw it into yourself." (Tracey)

One of the participants perceived transformational coaching as being crucial in supporting him to look at himself in the past, present and future and providing the willingness and support to do that. The participant and I also reflected on how important it is for the coachee to be willing to engage in the soul searching referred to and he concluded that:

"The difference between a coaching conversation and another conversation is creating the expectation for transformation and change." (Joe)

The power of the coaching conversation was referred to on many occasions

during the workshops and referred to in the learning logs and assignments and all the participants marvelled at how much they were willing to reveal to their coach, who was in many ways a stranger to them, as captured by Andy:

> *"I think it is true to say that you probably will never have the conversations with anyone else that you have with your coach, but it is a stranger and you know that very often after the coaching sessions you may never see that person again, yet it is so special for that space of time. You would talk about and reflect on things and reveal things that you would never reveal to anyone else." (Andy)*

The idea of the value of the stranger within communication was referred to by Georg Simmel in the 1980's (Rogers, 1999). One of the participants considered the power of questioning applied by the coach as being vital to the process of reflection:

> *"In my experience, nothing would have happened without the challenging questions being asked by the coach." (Angela)*

Having this time appears to facilitate the opportunity of taking a step back and getting a different perspective on their lives. As one of the students on

the leadership programme commented:

> *"Yeah, I think personally the reflection has been a really big thing because before the programme and the coaching I would say I was really good at reflecting, whereas really I think I was probably good at stewing (laughter). I really think that coaching is the way of unlocking the potential in people." (Stuart)*

One participant commented that he always had a sense of not reaching his true potential and that the coaching supported him to see this and, furthermore, offered the support that helped him to find the best way of exploring the options available. There appears to be a general consensus that the process of reflection continues beyond the coaching sessions themselves, facilitating the ability of the coachee to become much more reflective in other situations and circumstances, standing back from experiences and questioning the consequences of possible actions. One of the participants, a student on the leadership programme, observed that after her first experience of coaching she came away from it feeling that coaching made her think for herself and that at the end of the session she was exhausted:

> *"So, but it really makes you think from within. I remember coming away from it thinking that was hard, but worth it when I look back at the objectives that I*

had identified."(Kate)

In response to my question as to why she thought coaching challenged her to think so deeply she replied:

> *"Hmm, I think the continuing questioning and that my coach wouldn't settle for me. It was continual questioning well why do you want to do that, what do you want to get out of it at the end." (Kate)*

The same student also reflected that she came away from that first session with so much more information than she ever imagined that she would.

Coaching is seen to enhance our ability to reflect, but these reflections are not always seen as coherent or particularly substantive enough to bring about change. However, the coaching relationship appears to facilitate the opportunity to reflect and think things through over an extensive period of time, which does result in change. Coaching provides specific time out for guided thinking and reflection. The value and quality of the reflection is attributed to the collective thinking experienced in companionship with the coach. Having had psychotherapy in the past, one participant compared the coaching experience with psychotherapy and concluded that:

"Ironically I learnt more about myself in two sessions of coaching than in eighteen months of psychotherapy. The warmth and two-way approach of coaching was so different from the cold, almost clinical approach of the therapist." (Ann)

From her perspective, the skill of the coach seems to be her ability to ask the right questions and to consider further questions that the coachee may not have thought of before or may even be avoiding for a particular reason. If the latter is the case, the coaching process will facilitate that. Tracey expressed surprise in her log at how much she discovered about herself:

"Hearing yourself say things, I think, did I really say that, where did that come from? So profound really." (Tracey)

Without fail, every participant referred to the power of the coaching conversation in creating the ability to reflect much deeper than they could have done on their own and which reflects the assumptions of transformative learning and put forward in Chapter 2. Following further probing from me as to what is different about the coaching conversation as opposed to other conversations one participant commented that coaching as a process enables the coachee to become aware of her values, beliefs and attitude behind her actions and behaviours. Furthermore, it encourages the coachee to question

who and what is really her, which are the values and beliefs that reflect who she is. This is supported by Rogers (1980) who suggests that the greater the self-awareness an individual has the greater the chance that more informed choices will be made. One participant also commented that for him the shift was both attitudinal as well as emotional. This shift made him realise that he therefore wanted to start experimenting with doing things differently:

> *"I think what I've discovered so far gives me the confidence to do that or even the motivation to do that." (Dave)*

One participant attributed the issue of ownership and personal responsibility to the skills of the coach:

> *"My coach was very good at getting to the point, drilling down to what I needed to do." (Tim)*

My own reflections are that students believe their learning continued beyond the coaching sessions as it set in motion a depth of reflection they would not have achieved on their own. This thought is shared by one participant who commented as follows:

> *"When I first met my coach I was quite unsettled for a good few days afterwards and I couldn't put my finger*

on why, but there were stuff going on definitely, profound stuff. I was also having different conversations with people following the coaching."(Ann)

Reflecting on the way the participants describe their experiences of the coaching conversation, it reflects the key criteria of dialogue as discussed in Chapter 2 which transcends what is understood as conversation. Proponents of dialogue suggest that it contains dimensions of exploration (Bohm, 1990; De Weerdt, 1999; Garvey, *et al.*, 2009, Gunnlaugson, 2007; Senge, 1990). Both parties suspend a need for closure and engage in dialogue for the purpose of expanding their understanding; the coachee of herself and the coach her understanding of the coachee.

Theme 6 - Ownership

"Just the breakthrough moment in understanding that it was my responsibility to take care of my own development." (Dave)

There is a sense that the coach does not offer solutions, but instead emphasises the need for the individual to take ownership for her own development. This is also a major theme of transformative learning as put forward in Chapter 2. It was a particularly profound discovery for a student on the leadership programme as stated above.

The coaching provided the awareness of opportunities and the realisation that whatever objectives or outcomes they may want to achieve will only become a reality if they took action to make it happen. However, the coaching process seems to give the permission and the nudge needed to realise that the choice of acting on ideas was their responsibility:

> *"I think the opportunities were to a large extent inside myself." (Dave)*

A further comment in support of the sense of ownership by one of the leadership students was:

> *"It would have been easy, I think, for the organisation to put some objectives forward and for me to think well I'll see what comes my way and I'll tick the box, but having the coaching made me realise that no I'm not going to wait for things to come my way, I'm going to be responsible and put myself forward and yeah, so it was very much like I had the responsibility to do that." (Ross)*

She added that by thinking for herself she learnt so much more and concluded that she considered it to be a much better way of learning.

However, that was not necessarily the case at the beginning of the programme, particularly for the students on the leadership programmes. The reaction from students in the beginning was confusion, a sense of being lost and looking for answers and some were initially quite aggressive in pushing for goals and objectives to be provided to them either by their organisations or as outcomes of the programme. It took a while for some students to accept and become comfortable with establishing their own outcomes and projects. During an interview with two of the coaches supporting the students on their learning journey, we reflected on the benefit of the opportunity to be able to discuss and debate various options whilst at the same time having the choice for action given back to the coachee. The coaches commented that it also reinforced the non-judgemental approach from the coach:

> *"Whatever you want out of life you've got to take responsibility yourself and the coaching process because it pushes back and back at you, does reinforce actually nobody is going to tell me what to do here." (Mike and Mandy)*

Tracey reflected that with one of her coachees, this was a light bulb moment for them both:

"She realised she had the right to be who she wanted to be, she had a right to her life and the direction she wanted to go. She didn't have to wait for other people, she didn't have to wait for fate to play its hand, she didn't have to wait for circumstances to change, she had the right to take it and make her own mistakes." (Tracey)

The issue of ownership is one of the areas where power could be used and abused by either party. The need of the coachee to be given answers and solutions may mean that she manipulates the coach to provide her with solutions or objectives to pursue, thereby abdicating her personal power and ownership of the agenda. On the other hand, the coach may have a personal need to nurture or dominate the agenda and use her potential power to impose solutions on the coachee. As discussed elsewhere, a potential weakness of a strong humanistic approach is a tendency to nurture and support and for the coach to assume the responsibilities for the outcomes of the coaching intervention, thereby robbing the coachee of developing and pursuing her own choices.

Coaching provides the tools for the process of learning to continue after the coaching relationship has ceased. I continued with my reflections based on my experiences and conclude that people always start, in terms of outcomes, at a level much below what they are capable of. The power of coaching is

releasing the coachee from an attitude or a belief that prevents them from realising their potential. That is the power of the coaching space referred to by my participants. Jeschke (2002) offers a profound statement by William James (1907) who said that, 'The greatest discovery in our generation is that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds can change the outer aspects of their lives.' As Whitmore argues during an interview with Kauffman (2008) coaches do not bring wisdom, however, they evoke that in the coachee by drawing their own wisdom from them.

Theme 7 - Confidence

> *"You know it has given me so much more confidence in my own abilities and opportunities I would never have gone for which I am now happy to take. I also recently applied for a job I would never, never have applied for, ... because I just wouldn't have had the confidence. I thought, yeah I can do that and I felt confident about going for the interview." (Dave)*

The coaching experience also seems to generate a heightened sense of confidence. This increase in confidence is identified as helping the participants to believe in themselves and thereby the releasing of their potential. Dave, a student on one of the leadership programmes, initially demonstrated a lack of confidence and shared his story of how it helped him

to develop confidence in himself.

The added confidence has also meant that the students are embarking on programmes of learning they would not have had the confidence of enrolling on in the past. The coaching is also seen as facilitating the courage to pursue different opportunities for learning and Dave added:

> *"I've identified another manager that I have a lot of time for and I have approached him and asked him if he could be my unofficial mentor or if I could shadow him and that is the kind of thing I would never have dreamt of doing before and I've just gone to see him and said I think you're a very good manager, I work in your organisation and I want to learn from you."*
> *(Dave)*

In identifying the different phases of transformative learning, Mezirow (1981) includes the building of confidence. As Dave suggests, a lack of confidence in oneself can create barriers to achievement and opportunities for development. Higher confidence suggests a higher sense of competence and therefore increased achievement, as demonstrated by my respondent. In the earlier discussions on the nature of the coaching relationship, my respondents shared the supportive as well as challenging nature of the relationship. Developing greater confidence provides the individual with an

increased ability to accept both their strengths as well as their perceived weaknesses. However, it is also true to say that the process of learning might also lead to frustration and a lack of confidence as the learner is exposed to new information and knowledge. The possible confidence and ownership developed through coaching provides the individual with the ability to change her worldview to be more enabling, as described by Mezirow and other transformative learning scholars in Chapter 2.

Following the session on existentialism which students are introduced to as part of the MA in Coaching, Tony and I had a lengthy discussion about the value of existentialism in coaching and his response was that it was:

> *"...about making people strong in this world that sometimes try and suck energy from them and replace it with their own values and props. It's not needing the props of the world. So I think coaching and the kind of words I'm just thinking about now, is it gives people independence, it gives people a certain level of courage and if you measure courage the ability to act without the permission of others, hmm, and it helps people to know what to do not only in one circumstance, but in all circumstances because they know themselves a bit better and you know, what you want out of this." (Tony)*

He went on to say that:

> *"I keep coming back to this freeing up of people, and it is again that existentialist thing, we are so bound up to the cosmos, that we've got a place in it and that we've got a routine and our tracks and that we have an opinion about ourselves and that opinion is fixed and coaching unfixes things first of all and gives a bit of freedom and that journey inwards asking who am I, am I doing these things for me, do I do them for others, am I happy doing it for others or am I just in a rut in the extreme case and the coaching allows that and it gives people time, it encourages it through the conversation, it then has light touches around it because we all stumble and stop and we're not sure where to go next and it helps us to articulate it to ourselves." (Tony)*

The process as a journey was phrased very much in the same way by another participant:

> *"It is a journey to try and find out, you know there are so many theories about inner self and it is a journey*

about finding yourself, an inner journey." (Tim)

As Moore (2005) suggests, personal transformation is a journey that happens in stages. Mezirow (1991) recognises that different people enter the transformative learning journey with different levels of readiness to transform their worldview. This reflects the ideas of the skilled learner which I discuss in greater length below in point 5.3.

Theme 8 – Transformative Learning

> *"So the transformation has come out not necessarily in hard facts around what she knows, but in being comfortable with who she is and not having to put on extra clothes or different outfits, you know, to keep people happy and that as I say, has been really rewarding" (Tracey)*

Tracey pointed out that transformation may mean different things to different people and this is discussed in Chapter 2 in the review of the literature on transformative learning. I shared with George my idea of the process of coaching being a black box and that I perceive transformative learning to be very much an internal journey. His response was:

"This is a conversation I had with my coach when we tried to pin down exactly what I would want from this and the more I thought about it the more I think that on the surface level you think you're going to project your coaching outwards. Then probably by the second session it dawned on me that it wasn't moving the way I thought it would, but it was moving inward and what I want from this is a little bit more self-exploration and I think it is because of me, anyway, I feel it is something I have not done throughout my life, I've avoided it, but I think most people do. People will say, introspection, I'm very reflective and introspective, but I'm not sure it is true." (George)

George identifies the internal process which takes place as part of transformative learning or as Dirkx (Dirkx, *et al.*, 2006:125) describes it, "soul work or inner work." Change is seen as an unavoidable outcome of transformation and that without change transformation does not occur. Mezirow (1991) proposes that this inner journey of transformation requires a helper (i.e., educator, teacher, coach, counsellor, facilitator, friend) who can support the individual in identifying and examining her assumptions that underlie beliefs, feelings and actions. What is important in this process as suggested by my respondents is the non-judgemental approach of the coach

or suspension as referred to by Bohm (1996). Suspension on the part of both parties allows for the exploration of assumptions which eventually lead to transformative learning. Gunnlaugson (2007) suggests that suspension slows down the stream of consciousness which allows the individual to reflect on it. This may be what my respondents referred to when they talked about the sacred space or bubble as a psychological space. They also refer to the sense of time being suspended in this space.

Mezirow (1991) and other scholars of transformative learning have pointed out that it is through critical reflection that we come to examine the assumptions and expectations we hold. What has emerged from the stories of my respondents is that the coach as helper also facilitated an awareness of the possible consequences of these assumptions and to explore alternatives through reflective dialogue. One of the key assumptions associated with transformative learning is that it is rooted in the way people communicate as put forward by Mezirow (1997).

Gunnlaugson (2007) supports my assertion that transformation requires dialogue and he suggests that it is communication which transcends discursive reason and facilitates meta-awareness within the learner. Drawing on the work of Bohm (1996) Gunnlaugson (2007:139) puts forward a model of co-creative dialogue which supports my claims of the co-constructive nature of the coaching relationship. He puts forward a model of generative dialogue which he perceives as a catalyst for transformative learning. It

outlines the movement from "conventional conversation (talking nice) to debate (talking tough) through to reflective enquiry (reflective dialogue) toward forms of co-creative engagement in the final field of generative dialogue." He suggests that it is in the final field that the learner is able to explore in safety the assumptions she holds. He concludes with the final stage which he terms "presencing" where the individual becomes aware of the possibilities of new knowledge unfolding.

Furthermore, it is suggested by my respondents the coachee develops the ability to become more critically reflective even when the coach was not present and to integrate meaning perspectives that are more enabling. One of the professional coaches responded that it was not enough merely to have a recognition of change:

> *"The recognition is almost not enough, isn't it? You need to actually change your behaviours, you need to actually do something and so slowly changing your behaviours and then reinforcing them and then you can change them again. Otherwise, you can be as aware as you like, if you're doing anything differently it is a waste of time, isn't it? No not necessarily, if you want to change, if you feel you need to behave differently to (silence) get over that bit that you think might be a weakness or what you want to change, you*

almost have to start behaving differently. Otherwise, what was the point?" (Richard)

As Richard identifies, an expected outcome of transformative learning is the changes in behaviours (Joy-Matthews, *et al.*, 2004). Some proponents of adult learning go further and suggest that learning leads to a relatively permanent change in behaviour (Billett, 2004; Werner and DeSimone, 2005) which resonates with the Social Development Theory of Vygotsky (1978) and the constructionist approach of Bruner (1990) discussed in Chapter 2. One participant, a student on the coaching programme, made a comment when we were discussing the nature of transformative learning:

"I think it is always strange with transformational learning that people assume it is very positive and yes it may be very positive in the end, but, hmm, I think it sometimes requires you to work through something that is painful and to realise that there is light at the end." (Melanie)

This was clearly the case for this participant as her comments were accompanied by tearful emotions. Furthermore, transformation was also not necessarily seen as one major event. Instead for some it meant a series of smaller events that collectively created transformation overall. I reflected at length with George on the nature of transformative learning and as a result

of our conversation, I posed the question whether he thought an emotional shift was an important element of transformative learning. I added whether he thought one can achieve a transformational shift without an emotional change. From my experience and the literature on transformative learning, it seems that the one follows the other (Brookfield, 1995; Dirkx, 2001; Ferrer, *et al.*, 2005; Mezirow, 1991) :

> *"It's a good question. My initial instinct is to say no (long silence while he stared at the ceiling, reflecting on my questions and comments). Because for me if there is a transformation there has to be a change to attitude. There has to be an emotional shift otherwise it is more at the functional level. Otherwise it is more of a temporary shift, you know. I've seen evidence of that in the past using functional coaching. I've seen people's behaviour change even in the short term and that is often not sustained because there hasn't been that attitudinal shift, that fundamental shift in beliefs, certainly how people approach things, feel about things and certain beliefs about things. So I think for transformation there has to be a shift." (George)*

The inclusion of emotion in coaching was also raised by Tony:

"Unlike all of the programmes I have done before there is not an emotional element to it, but with this programme there is an emotional element to it and the coaching has made me think about who I am and if there is a fundamental desire to change and I don't mean on the surface level." (Tony)

However, it also seems that communicating and articulating the nature of values and beliefs are problematic when we try and express these through language:

"The language of that deeper level, as soon as you go beyond behaviours is perhaps not words, which is why we find it so difficult to articulate that really it is a different type of communication, which is why intuition then is important in terms of sensing things, so it is almost as though one needs a different form of communication that goes beyond behaviours. Behaviours use words and narrative, but the values and the beliefs and the deeper is different, such as metaphors and stories in a way as well that reflection." (Melanie)

I suggest that the change of worldview referred to by Mezirow (1991) and other proponents of transformative learning (Dirkx, 2006; Tenant, 2005) lead to a change in the values and beliefs of the learner which is accompanied by emotions. Dirkx (2006) states that emotion directs the learner's attention to the imaginative dimensions of her being, thereby connecting and integrating powerful feelings which often arise within the context of intellectual and cognitive development. Dirkx (2006:132) also proposes that learning experiences that are meaningful are also deeply emotional, "evoking powerful feelings, such as fear, grief, loss, regret, and anger, but also sometimes joy, wonder, and awe." These sentiments are reflected in the stories of my respondents.

Melanie and I continued to explore different approaches that would be more valuable than mere words:

> *"Possibly also art, which is also why I possibly think art therapy works very well with people that have for example, been traumatised and there is no language to put it into words, but the visual can help to do that, so yeah, I think there is something in it. It is a different way of communicating and I think that is why we do need analogies, metaphors and examples, you know, tell me more about that, give me examples and that sort of thing, but then you can pin point certain aspects of it*

or look at it in a different way." (Melanie)

A conversation with one participant on the coaching programme supported the value of emotions as part of the coaching process:

> *"I never thought of it like that because really what it sounds like, certainly what it feels like, is that emotions are almost, hmm, a channel or a vehicle into our values and beliefs and then greater awareness and understanding and that it is actually the facilitator of understanding. Because if I have an emotional reaction and I become conscious of that emotional reaction then we can have a glimpse or understanding of what generates those emotions and which often is at the heart of what our values and beliefs are because we only respond to things that touches a value or a belief." (Joe)*

The participant then followed by saying, that:

> *"Yeah, I think that is spot on. Yeah, exactly, I think that is spot on. Because if you like it is a kind of a symbol of what is important to you and I think, again, on the transformation that has been really important*

to me was for me to reflect on and to become aware of what my values are, hmm, and as I say I have emotional responses to things now that I don't fully understand, but the emotional responses and, hmm, awareness I've had has been really powerful, you know and that understanding of myself then leads to an understanding of other people. I think that's also one of the things that I wanted to get out of the coaching as well, that emotional intelligence, you know." (Joe)

An emotional shift is a theme many of the participants referred to as being associated with the transformative experience. For change to take place, one needs to understand why one does something in the first place and emotions are perceived as a route into that understanding, which precedes change. There seems to be a general consensus that behaviours are the result of emotions and that emotions are in turn as a result of the values and beliefs that have been touched, much like a raw nerve. Through awareness and understanding of those emotions come the management of the response and to a large extent leading to an awareness of the available choices of response. The idea of choice and ownership is associated with transformative learning and Cranton (1994) emphasises the need for the learner to have ownership of the learning outcomes. This is reflected in the assumptions of coaching that the coachee owns and drives the agenda. It is

seen as good and healthy to have emotions and emotional responses and that through awareness one is able to channel them in a positive way. This is an interesting area of research in psychology, namely positive psychology that advocates the need for the recognition, balance and in particular the inclusion of both negative and positive emotions.

From the above themes, supported by both my respondents and the literature on transformative learning, it would appear that the transformative experience requires the presence of most of the themes identified above. As suggested by numerous authors, the transformative process requires the co-constructive relationship with a helper who engages in dialogue for the purpose of exploring the worldview of the learner or coachee in this instance. There is mention of the suspension of time within a space or container which allows the vulnerability of the coachee to emerge. Emotions seem to accompany the transition of assumptions which ultimately lead to changes in behaviour.

5.3 The Skilled Learner

Much has been written about the skills of the coach, but very little is said about the skills of the coachee as an effective learner within the coaching process (Stokes, 2007). As very little is available by way of the skilled coachee, Stokes draws on the work of Pearn and Down (1989) in which they list the attributes of the skilled learner in understanding what would be

expected of a skilled coachee. As the essence of this research is about coaching and learning, these attributes are particularly relevant. The key message is that the skilled learner plays an active role in their own learning and that learning is gained through experience. This assumption is discussed at length in Chapter 2 and a review of the literature on Transformative Learning.

Learning is also seen as a process of understanding rather than the mere memorising of facts. Learners are expected to take responsibility for how they learn and their learning is not necessarily seen as being dependent on the quality of the teaching. Questioning and feedback is perceived as important and to be sought by the student for the purpose of developing her performance. Skilled learners are also seen as being open to and seeking new learning opportunities. If philosophically the coach or facilitator of learning adopts the perspective outlined in this section, then the relationship becomes one of equals and shared partners in the journey of discovery. This also reinforces my argument made elsewhere that the inputs and outputs are not what drive the process as it will be different from one coachee to another, depending on what they select as their learning experience. The selection of tools and techniques are therefore driven by the needs of the coachee and not the focus of the process.

The idea of the skilled learner is further significant as it dawned on me when I started interpreting the stories of my participants that there was very little

by way of cynicism, negativity or adverse comments about their coaching experiences. I reflected on whether I have influenced the responses of my interviewees or were in some way filtering out adverse comments. They expressed views of uncertainty about what coaching was, and initially some scepticism as to the power of the process and what it could deliver, but no outright rejection of coaching support as part of their learning programmes. It is true to say that the experience was more transformational for some than for others and not everyone attributed the same level of learning from the coaching intervention. This could be attributed to an endless number of possibilities, namely the level of their participation, personal circumstances, personal characteristics, environment, skills of the coach; and many more variables not identified. There were comments by some students that the experience of coaching and where it led them was not always a positive one. This was due to sometimes exploring difficult and painful personal situations and emotions.

The concept of the skilled learner helped me to explain this as all of the students were aware from the outset that their programmes were either supported by coaching in the case of the management and leadership programmes. The second group of students were engaged in a programme of learning for the purpose of developing skills and competencies in coaching. All of the students were therefore open and willing to engage in the coaching process with varying degrees of enthusiasm or scepticism. They can therefore be labelled as 'skilled coachees'. I also challenge the

assumption that there necessarily has to be a negative response to the process within the context of my research, but I also recognise that within a different situation different coachees might have had a different experience of coaching. This is, however, not the place to explore that. I will add an observation based on personal experience that work-based adult learners are more often than not motivated and willing to learn.

In support of the concept of the skilled learner, a number of proponents of coaching suggest that the success of the coaching relationship is equally as dependent on the willingness of the coachee to be coached (Bachkirova, 2007; Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2007). I argue that this is possibly one of the major contributors to the positive experience my participants had of coaching; they were all willing to engage. The coachee has to be prepared to enter into a deep and interpersonal communication with the coach (Quick and Macik-Frey, 2004) and as Hargrove (1995) suggests, it is through the coaching conversation that all coaching intervention takes place.

5.4 Discussions and Conclusions

The key message that emerges from an analysis of the data is the quality of the relationship the coach and coachee establishes and the importance of it in the total experience of coaching. It is also apparent that it is a relationship like no other and identified in the literature and described as such by Whitworth, *et al.* (1998). They also suggest that its uniqueness is dependent

on the state of the coach namely to strive to be without judgement and accepting the coachee exactly for what she is. The participants and data reinforce the claims by numerous proponents as to the nature of the relationship being influential in the quality of the experience (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2007; O'Broin and Palmer, 2007; Maethner, Jansen & Bachmann, 2005). Furthermore, it is seen as being transient by nature and it might be that this factor contributes to the quality of the relationship. The themes that have emerged reinforce the importance of the co-constructive relationship between the coach and coachee. The first three themes identified by my respondents are attributed to the ability or approach of the coach, namely to create trust, the coach as their champion and the non-judgemental stance towards the coachee.

The next three themes are associated with the coaching relationship and the 'black box' I referred to in the Introduction. It is seen to have the capacity to create a sacred space within which the coachee is able to take the time to reflect. The relationship is also seen to support and challenge the coachee to take responsibility for the choices and decisions she may take. The value my participants attached to the 'space' they referred to came as a surprise to me. Many suggested this was a psychological place they could return to between coaching sessions. I argue therefore that the process of coaching continues beyond the actual time spent with the coach. Cox (2006) elegantly provides the thread of constructionism introduced throughout this thesis and suggests that the reflective process facilitated by the coach within the 'bubble' allows

the coachee to reflect on both knowledge and experience, past and present, for the purpose of generating new knowledge and understanding and identified as the process of transformation. There is also a strong parallel between the role, characteristics and assumptions of the coach and that of the transformative teacher as discussed in a review of the literature in Chapter 2. The remaining two themes identify outcomes achieved by the coachee such as confidence and what was identified by my respondents as transformational learning.

The themes which emerged reflect the fundamental assumption of the humanistic approach which suggests the focus of the coaching intervention is on the individual. The quality of the supportive relationship and space created as a result also mirror a fundamental principle of the humanistic approach, namely a passion and commitment on behalf of the coach in facilitating the self-actualisation of the coachee. I would, however, add a caveat that such an approach may result in a blind spot preventing the coach from remaining emotionally detached from their client. This could preclude the coach from challenging the beliefs and assumptions which underpin the behaviours and actions of the coachee, thereby preventing change. On the other hand, the coach would benefit from drawing on the scepticism associated with postmodernism and discussed in earlier chapters. This will enable the coach to question and challenge the metanarrative of the coachee.

I also refer to the idea of the skilled learner and which has had very little mention in the literature. I suggest that a significant contribution to the transformational experience my participants demonstrated is that they are skilled coachees and therefore capable of extracting the most from the coaching experience. As suggested above, skilled learners are expected to take responsibility for how they learn and their learning is not necessarily seen as being dependent on the quality of the teaching. It may very well be that a less skilled coachee may not have experienced the same level of transformation as evidenced by my participants.

What is also apparent from my data is that the deep communication referred to is sometimes painful and at times resisted and possibly accompanied by strong emotions. However, the opportunity for reflection brought with it new insight into issues they may have avoided. Not all of the coaching relationships resulted in the same transformation and in fact, some were described as mediocre. This could be due to many contributing factors. It could be that the coachee was resistant and not open to coaching, which reflects the idea of the skilled coachee and their willingness to engage and referred to in the literature review. It could also be that there is an assumption by both coach and coachee that a breakthrough of some kind needs to occur as a result of the coaching process.

Irrespective of the programme the students had enrolled on, the coaching is seen as having underpinned the whole learning experience of their respective

programmes. As I reread the stories I am acutely aware that there are many sub-themes I could have explored. However, I deliberately bracketed my story to help me address the purpose of this research, namely to establish if there is a connection between coaching and transformative learning within the adult, work-based learner. I briefly discuss the controversial nature of bracketing as defined by Le Vasseur (2003). Although bracketing has been described as holding prior knowledge in abeyance for the purpose of understanding the phenomena more clearly, it has been controversial when hermeneutic phenomenology has been used. As Le Vasseur (2003) point out, most phenomenologists who followed Husserl have taken issue with it as they recognise the value of past experience of the researcher. The meaning of bracketing as I have applied it is to remain curious about the phenomena broadly contained within the hermeneutic hunch I started with at the beginning of the research journey. However, the themes provide numerous rich veins for future research projects. Not all, however, address my original hermeneutic hunch.

As Le Vasseur (2003:419) suggests: "In other words, the project of bracketing attempts to get beyond the ordinary assumptions of understanding and stay persistently curious about new phenomena. I believe this provides opportunity for fresh experience and the possibility of new horizons of meaning. Given that under this construction, bracketing can be seen as a hermeneutic move, it is not inconsistent to employ bracketing within an interpretive research project." Finally, I refer to the Tamara-land

metaphor used by Boje (1995) and introduced in Chapter 4, which suggests that it would be impossible to understand the phenomena of coaching in its totality. I therefore need to make a choice as to which stories I will follow and the stories I have selected are the ones that have helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the possible relationship between coaching and adult learning.

6

Conclusions

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I reflect on the research journey I have been on and conclude that there is a strong relationship between transformative adult learning and coaching. I also provide what I consider the contributions to knowledge to be and how my findings add to an understanding of the coaching process. This is demonstrated by a final heuristic which has evolved throughout the research journey, evidenced in previous chapters. I also suggest opportunities for further research which my findings have signposted as being relevant and worthy of pursuit. With any research project there are inevitable weaknesses and things one would have done differently and I identify what I perceive these to be.

6.2 The Conclusions Drawn with Rationale

6.2.1 Transformative Learning

Although a review of the literature suggests there is not a conclusive definition of transformative learning, there are shared expectations of what needs to be present for learning to be recognised as transformational. Transformative learning as described by adult learning theories was also identified by my participants as being

present and contributing to the experiences they had of coaching. The conclusion I draw from my research is that there is a strong relationship between coaching and transformative learning. The themes identified by my respondents, and discussed in the previous chapter, are also present in what is perceived as the characteristics of transformative learning put forward by the literature in Chapter 2. I discuss these characteristics in relation to the themes identified by my respondents as follows.

Inner Learning

Winch and Ingram (2004) identifies transformative learning as inner learning where constructs about self and others are questioned. My participants referred to coaching as facilitating an inner journey which challenged them to think differently about themselves, others and their circumstances. They also suggested that a significant role of their coach was to challenge their assumptions. Furthermore, in order to embark on this journey of inner learning facilitated by their coach, trust of their coach seemed to be a key component which made this possible. The trust established provided the support for the coachee to continue on this unknown journey of discovery. A contributing factor in establishing the sense of trust was attributed to the independence of the coach from most aspects of their lives, both professionally and personally.

For some of my participants it was more than an independence from their lives as they perceived the coach as a relative stranger. It was also apparent that the responsibility for creating the trusting relationship rested with the coach. This reflects the responsibility of how the coach 'showed up' at a coaching session or the 'presence' of the coach referred to in the literature. My participants also experienced the role of the coach as providing feedback, offering support in exploring and creating options and then helping them to identify the consequences of those options. As Wilson (2007) succinctly puts it, coaching is in essence self-directed learning which is achieved through the art of questioning, directing the attention of the individual inwards.

Winch and Ingram (2004) also suggest that the experience of transformative learning is accompanied by emotional energy which impacts on how the individual perceives herself. This was also the experience of my participants some of whom identified this journey being accompanied by emotions, both uplifting as well as painful. This reflects the thoughts of Mezirow (1991), one of the key proponents of transformative learning, who argues that adult learning is an inner journey which involves values and feelings.

Critical Reflection

Change or transformation is according to transformative learning

preceded by critical reflection. Mezirow (1991) argues that transformation is seen as the ability to think critically. What was apparent from my participants was the need for the presence of the coach in order to achieve critical reflection. The coach supported them in their examination of a particular issue resulting in adaptation both cognitive and behavioural. It is almost suggested that they would not have reached the same level of reflection or outcomes on their own.

The notion of such a partnership is supported by the principles of constructionism which argues reality is collectively created and can not be achieved independently. Furthermore, according to my participants such reflection continued beyond the coaching sessions itself, resulting in further insights as though a process had been set in motion. This is supported by proponents of adult learning who suggest that it supports the learner to develop a meta-competence; learning how to learn. This might be what is referred to by some proponents of coaching when they suggest the success of coaching is to provide the coachee with the ability to self coach. A significant contributing factor identified by my participants was the ownership that accompanied the ability to self coach. The agenda and the focus of the coaching sessions were driven by my participants.

I reflected on these comments from the participants and concluded

that the coaching experience creates the independent learner which is one of the key aspects of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1981; Conle, 2001). The role of the independent learner reflects the characteristics of the skilled learner and/or coachee discussed in Chapter 4. The key message is that the skilled learner plays an active role in their own learning as is expected of the experiences of my participants, resulting in continual learning.

Co-Construction

Mezirow (1990) and other transformative learning scholars propose that transformative learning does not happen in isolation and is indeed a social affair that requires interaction, debate, and being exposed to the alternative realities presented by others. The literature on adult learning argues strongly that learning does not take place in isolation, but that it requires the interaction with others, in particular between the educator and learner. As suggested above, my participants stated that the insight they have gained was as a result of a partnership with their coach. Furthermore, the 'bubble' or 'sacred space' that was so powerful for them was seen to have created the conditions through which they were able to interact in a way that brought about the insights they referred to.

The principles of constructionism are evident as a condition of transformative learning and discussed in Chapter 2. Constructionism

suggests that when people talk and engage with each other relationally, the world gets constructed. This is reflected in the experiences of my participants. In Chapter 3 I discussed the influence of constructionism to my research approach and although not explicitly associated with coaching in the literature, I would argue that much of the literature on transformative learning and the responses from my participants resonate with the principles of constructionism. Burr (1995) suggests the term constructionism has taken shape against the backcloth of postmodernism and could therefore be defined as an ontology and theory of knowledge. However, from the literature on adult learning and the stories of my respondents, I suggest it is also a practice for the purpose of constructing knowledge and understanding through the interaction with others; In the words of Weick (1995) to make sense of the world. Knowledge is not seen as having an independent existence, but is seen to be constructed through communal and participative relationships such as that between the coach and coachee.

Transformative Educator

Pounder (2006) argues that transformative teachers have a fundamental belief in profound potential. The literature on adult learning identifies the educator as an integral part of transformative learning. The importance of the partnership between the coach and coachee was also identified by my respondents as a key aspect of the

transformative learning. In turn my respondents perceived the coach as their champion who for the duration of the coaching sessions were committed and absorbed by their agenda. The educator provides support and encouragement and focuses on the building of trusting relationships of a non-judgemental nature, accepting the learner as they are, including their particular world-view. Cranton (1994) adds that the role of transformative educator is that of provocateur, encouraging critical thinking, challenging assumptions and norms and stimulates thinking. It is apparent from the stories of my participants that critical thinking was made possible through the non-judgmental challenges they received from their coach. The theme which emerged is the role of coach as their champion. Not only did they perceive the coach as having their best interests at heart, but they also valued the challenges posed by the coach.

The quality of the relationship between the learner and educator as described above was clearly identified by my participants. The responsibility in creating the bond or rapport between coach and coachee or educator and learner appears to be largely attributed to the coach. The ability of the coach in creating the quality of the relationship is identified in different ways by different authors and discussed in the review of the literature in Chapter 2. Cranton (1994) makes the connection with constructionism and argues that learning from this perspective is perceived as a process for the express

purpose of releasing potential and to transform the learner. According to my participants the outcome of the relationship then leads to the sacred space which they referred to on many occasions. I pointed out in previous chapters, that the space identified holds the potential for an abuse of power and is an area where further critical research would add value.

Dialogical Communication

There is much reference made to the coaching conversation in the literature. However, what is apparent from the stories of my participants is that the conversations they had with their coach reflects what Bohm and others have identified as dialogue. The power of dialogue is present throughout the discussions in my thesis. It is referred to in the hermeneutic circle, sensemaking and is particularly associated with transformative learning. The type of communication my participants suggested they entered into with the coach reflects the elements of dialogue as discussed in Chapter 2. This is summarised by Garvey, *et al.* (2009) who suggest that it is through the power of dialogue that attitudes and performance are changed and shaped.

According to my participants, and supported by the literature, the depth of the communication associated with the quality of the relationship referred to above is achieved through dialogue rather

than through conversation. Whybrow (2008) concurs and proposes that dialogue facilitates the curiosity the coachee has about herself which stimulates her ability to think things through. Dialogue can be perceived as emancipatory as it resists the need or temptation to persuade or convince the participants of a single or meta-perspective. An emancipative outcome emerged for my participants who reported increased confidence to take action they would not have considered possible prior to the coaching experience. It is through dialogue that my participants made sense of their world and their experiences. Furthermore dialogue reflects the non-judgemental nature of the coaching relationship as suggested by my participants.

I argue that performance coaching with a focus on explicit goals and objectives denies the opportunity of entering into dialogue which is without a specific agenda. Hargrove (1995) argues that a successful coaching relationship is always a story about transformation and not mere higher levels of performance. Bohm (1992) proposes that for dialogue to occur it is necessary for participants to suspend their assumptions, requiring a sense of a shared quest for deeper insight and clarity. This reflects the co-constructive relationship identified by my participants. The suggestion that dialogue is a powerful way of making collective sense of our experiences is supported by Dixon (1999) who suggests that dialogue is the most powerful form of communication through which we are able to reveal our meaning

structures to ourselves and others.

The dialogical space embraces divergence, multiplicity and possibility rather than the convergence, uniformity and certainty of direction. As put forward by proponents of transformative learning, dialogue also supports the need for a facilitator and suggests that it is not a state reached by an individual in isolation. The power of dialogue allows for the free flowing of meaning to pass between the coach and coachee and which is synonymous with the constructionist approach to learning and summarises the experiences of my participants.

It will be apparent from the stories told by my participants that the emergent knowledge and insight they gained through the coaching 'space' was the result of dialogue as described above. In outlining the different levels of dialogue, Garvey, *et al.* (2009) conclude that it is through the non-linear learning conversations of dialogue that deep-seated transformation occurs. Through dialogue the coach and coachee is able to engage in reflective practice, perceived by both transformative learning and coaching as a necessary part of the process.

6.2.2 Coaching as Sensemaking

I draw extensively on sensemaking as identified by Weick (1995) as a methodological framework for research in Chapter 4. Reflecting on the literature and the experiences of coaching as shared by my participants, I conclude that the process of coaching also reflects the characteristics of sensemaking. Weick (1995) argues that we make sense of situations and experiences retrospectively. I suggest that retrospective sensemaking is what my participants refer to when they talk about reflecting on particular issues and constructing different meanings in partnership with the coach. Transformative learning is identified as the ability to deconstruct or make sense of existing knowledge for the purpose of constructing different or additional knowledge and understanding. A key component of transformative learning, supported by my participants, is the ability of the learner to reflect on experiences, assumptions and world views. As Weick (1995) suggests the outcome is to make retrospective sense of those experiences.

The seven characteristics of sensemaking discussed in Chapter 4 provide a structure through which the coachee is able to put her experiences in a temporal order (Czarniawska, 1997). The quality of that sensemaking is seen as being reliant on the quality of the relationship with the coach, which in turn reflects the assumptions of

dialogue. Boje (2008) identifies sensemaking as complex and diverse and suggests that an individual can at any one time make sense of many aspects and roles of themselves through interaction with others, whilst at the same time transcending different time frames. A person also makes a choice at different stages of the sensemaking as to what she will focus on at a given time.

Sensemaking also recognises the relational aspect of meaning creation associated with both transformative learning and coaching and suggest that shared meaning is created within relationships and sustained through a common language. Weick (1995) also draws parallels with storytelling and suggests that it is through stories that we share the sense we make of a given situation, thereby creating a collective and shared understanding of reality as perceived at a particular time. Through the sharing of their stories, my participants made sense of their particular situations with their coaches in the collective and socially negotiated manner of storytelling as identified by Boje *et al.* (1999). Socialisation is seen as the milieu within which our sensemaking takes place. Sensemaking is not limited to, but includes the values, frames of references and meanings we assign to situations and which is seen as necessary part of transformative learning and reflected in the experiences of my participants.

During the sensemaking process, the person filters, categorises and integrates new stimuli into her existing frames of reference. As my participants suggest, the coaching space provide the support needed in dealing with the constant bombardment of stimuli in a more conscious manner and thereby assisting them in making sense of it. These stimuli act as the cues Weick (1995) refers to and discussed in Chapter 4. It also enables the individual to exercise greater choice in selecting the sense to be made (du Toit, 2007). For example, an individual may perceive only one solution or choice when faced with a particular situation. However, supported through dialogue and sensemaking the coachee may recognise different and alternative choices available to her.

Based on my findings I suggest that both coaching and learning is the name which we give to the sensemaking of our worlds and allowing us to integrate new experiences into our existing frames of references. Although sensemaking as described by Weick is well documented in relation to transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Schwandt, 2005), it is not discussed in relation to coaching. Not only does sensemaking provide a methodology for research, but it is also evident from the patterns that have emerged from my data, that coaching is a process of sensemaking. What is also apparent is that transformative learning happened as part of this process. It was not

explicitly sought as an outcome, but it spontaneously flowed from the coaching intervention.

6.3 Evolving Coaching Heuristic

In Chapter 1 identified a hunch, as suggested by hermeneutics, about coaching as an interactive triangle which includes transformative learning, sensemaking and dialogue, leading to the emancipation referred to above. I put forward a revised version of the triangle in Chapter 3 and based on the findings of my data and the literature, particularly that of adult learning theories, I now offer a further evolved heuristic which summarises the relationship between coaching and adult learning identified above. Instead of a triangle, which may suggest a hierarchy of the elements that make up the triangle, I perceive a circle to be more reflective of the experiences of my participants and the discoveries I have made on the research journey. I am also drawn to the notion of a circle as it reflects the hermeneutic circle. It also suggests that by continually journeying around the circle, we generate a deeper understanding of the subject. I have also added a further dimension namely the construction of meaning.

The elements of the coaching circle are interactive and the coachee may journey around the circle a number of times throughout the coaching experience. I put this model forward as a heuristic which identifies the 'black box' I referred to in Chapter 1. I recognise that the proposed heuristic

reflects the concepts associated with Open System Models, which suggests exchange and feedback of the system with its environment. An open system includes inputs, processes, outputs, goals assessment and learning, similar to the heuristic I propose. However, as my interest has been in gaining greater understanding of the 'black box' of coaching, the emphasis of the contribution to an understanding of the coaching phenomena is therefore centred on the elements within the circle which I discuss in detail above. It is for this reason that the input and output elements of the heuristic is presented in the colour grey. In conclusion, based on a review of the literature and the analysis of my data, if the elements suggested in the heuristic are present coaching is more likely to lead to transformation as identified by the literature on adult transformative learning.

Figure 6.1 - The Coaching Cycle

Inputs – Coach

Referring to the previous chapter which analysis the themes identified by my respondents, the first three themes were attributed to the coach.

Trust

My respondents concur with the literature that the trust between the coach and coachee is necessary to provide the coachee with the confidence to enter into the coaching relationship as they embark on a journey which is largely unknown.

Champion

The coach as champion reflects the role of educator as identified by the literature on adult learning. The coach as champion facilitates the realisation of the potential of the coachee.

Challenge

As suggested by the literature self-actualisation is supported by the non-judgemental challenge offered by the educator or coach. As identified by my respondents the coach listens and challenges without judgement.

The Coaching Process

Sacred Space

My respondents referred to this space as the psychological place or 'bubble' they were able to co-construct with their coach and engage in the following:

Dialogue

The level of engagement between the coach and coachee reflects what is identified as dialogue and perceived as fundamental to transformative

learning as it reflects the non-judgemental challenge and support necessary to question the assumptions of the learner or coachee.

Sensemaking

Based on the characteristics of sensemaking put forward by Weick (1995) the coach and coachee collectively make sense of the issues brought into the coaching space.

Constructing Meaning

It is clear from both the literature and my respondents that the meaning or sense they made within the coaching relationship was achieved collectively in a co-constructive relationship with their coach.

Transformative Learning

Within this space my respondents reflected the inner learning and reflection referred to by adult learning which facilitated the questioning of their world-view.

Outputs – Coachee

Ownership

Although my respondents suggested that the coach does not offer solutions, the coaching relationship did, however, generate an ownership of the choices and decisions they made as a result of the coaching received.

Confidence

The coaching experience generated a heightened sense of confidence which enabled my respondents to take the ownership referred to above.

Continuous Learning

The experience of my respondents reflected the literature on adult learning which suggests that the learner learns how to learn or in the case of coaching, how to self-coach after the ending of the coaching relationship.

6.4 Concluding Story

In conclusion I offer the following overarching story drawn from the individual stories of my respondents which depict their journey through the elements of the coaching heuristic. The story tells the experiences of both coach and coachee which reflects the co-constructive relationship between them as described by the literature on transformative learning and also acknowledged by my respondents. It is a collective story which combines the main threads from their individual stories, reflecting the expectations of transformative learning identified in this thesis and shared by my respondents. It is offered as concluding story rather than as a grand narrative.

> *From perceiving coaching as a mechanistic process at the start of the course I (quite quickly) moved my viewpoint of coaching away from the "I need to be the*

expert and dictate my opinions" approach to the coach as one who releases potential in others. My own personal responsibility begins and ends with me. As a coach my responsibility to others involves allowing their own, authentic, thoughts and decisions to emerge and to facilitate their taking ownership of their life's works. This all sounds very grand and does indeed constitute a sea change in my own outlook but the big question is "how do I become that coach, how do I turn ambition into achievement". The key reflective point of this was that the direction of the coaching journey was decided by the coachee. There has been a strengthening realisation that the art of coaching does not emanate from that which you input but from that which you draw out. I came to realise through the interaction within the coaching relationship that people have more depth than they overtly display. They each have a story, and even a shared experience can be viewed from different perspectives which solitary thought and reflection would not have achieved. It is as though the coach and coachee spark each other off to draw conclusions neither would have reached independently.

In my own experience as the coachee it dawned on me that it wasn't moving the way I thought it would, but it was moving inward and what I want from this is a little bit more self-exploration and I think it is because of me, anyway, I feel it is something I have not done throughout my life, I've avoided it, but I think most people do. People will say, introspection, I'm very reflective and introspective, but I'm not sure it is true. The most important aspect for me so far has been the reflection. I found there to be an emotional element to coaching which made me think about who I am and if there is a fundamental desire to change and I don't mean on the surface level, not I need to lose a bit of weight or get fit. Instead, you start thinking of where am I, is that where I want to be, am I happy with that or do I wish to shift that point and if I do, am I happy with what it's going to take to shift it? So I think it is that kind of inner journey. It felt OK to ask these questions as my coach didn't seem to sit in judgement of me or thought me to be foolish or something. To me that is the heart of coaching. It is to allow a person to be themselves. I couldn't understand how you couldn't apply judgment and advice and that clicked for me in the second session. It is not about you the coach changing the coachee, doing more like the coach or to agree with the coach, you

can't do that. People have no right to change other people. What you do is to free them to change themselves or not as they wish to do. And when you start doing that you automatically start doing it for yourself.

Together with your coach you seem to create this kind of ambience of trust and then we're in a position to quietly articulate our own thoughts, which is something we don't normally do. There is also the verbalising of it and it is only when somebody kicks in and points out something different, even if it is a small thing, it creates different insights and understanding to something you might have been grabbling with for a long time. You can see patterns emerging and I think the coaching gives you that structure to do that. I don't think people do it on their own, I think it is difficult for them to do. What has also been a very powerful outcome for me was the experience of strong emotions at times and that they are key to understanding what is important to us – our values – and are a cue for coaching. Strong emotions tell us that either our values are being challenged and under threat or are being satisfied in a meaningful way. Emotions are a symptom of something deeper; we may not know what at first but they should be examined, not suppressed, to find what lies beneath.

I didn't really understand until I got into coaching what it would actually do for me. I think the reason the coaching space works is that is frees up people, I keep coming back to this freeing up of people. It also helped me to understand the emphasis is on me the individual to take ownership for my own development rather than expecting the organisation or the coach to give it to me. I guess I've always known I had potential that I wasn't tapping into. One of the key things for me is the confidence that coaching has helped me to build so that I can take ownership of my future. The picture that comes to my mind is the chrysalis turning into the butterfly. The butterfly is the chrysalis, nothing has changed, there is that person and there is that psyche and it is simply a huge transformation that can come from a small release. Also the most powerful thing for me is that you can't force it, you know, you have a conversation and you just, you don't know what's going to come from it and it maybe days, weeks and months afterwards that something might come to you. It's as though your coach stays in your head and the conversations continue.

6.5 Contribution to Knowledge

In summary, my research has led me to understand coaching as an

integration of dialogue, sensemaking and the collective construction of learning. The stories revealed by my respondents emphasise the special nature of the coaching relationship between the coach and coachee. The overall experience of coaching by my respondents reflects the assumptions associated with transformative learning namely that it is facilitated by the quality of the relationship. The purpose of my research was to contribute to an understanding of what I termed to be the 'black box' of coaching which I understood as being the conversion process between the inputs and outputs of coaching. As seen from the literature review, an emphasis on the inputs and outputs has dominated the coaching literature. However, my findings would suggest that irrespective of the models or techniques applied or the outcomes sought the elements I have identified needed to be present if the conversion was to take place. The four elements included in the black box has not been explicitly associated with coaching or referred to in the literature although three are directly associated with the theories of transformative learning. They include 1) dialogue; 2) sensemaking; 3) co-constructing meaning and 4) transformative learning. I discuss each of these as follows :

1. One of the themes that have recurred time and time again from the stories shared by my participants is the special nature of the relationship between the coach and coachee. The nature of the relationship is seen as instrumental in the quality of their experience of coaching leading to reflection and transformation. The characteristics identified are

synonymous with what is expected of dialogical communication as put forward by Bohm (1996), one of the main proponents of dialogue and supported by others (Senge, 1990, de Weerdt, 1999; Gunnlaugson, 2007). As discussed in the literature review, there has been much reference made to the quality of the conversations between the coach and the coachee. However, from the stories shared by my respondents, it is evident that the communication between the coach and coachee went beyond conversations to reflect the elements associated with dialogue.

2. I extensively discussed sensemaking as identified by Weick (1979, 1995, 2001, 2006, 2009) as a valid methodology to research in Chapter 3. What has emerged from the review of the literature and supported by the findings from my data analysis is that coaching can also be described as a sensemaking process. Irrespective of the tools, techniques or models the coach selects with which to support the coachee in whatever outcome they deem to be valid, the process involved is that of sensemaking. The tentative and limited association made between coaching and sensemaking has been made more explicit through a review of the literature and the supporting data.
3. Mezirow (1990) proposes that transformative learning does not happen in isolation and is indeed a social affair that requires interaction, debate, and being exposed to alternative realities. Consistent interaction with others is seen as fundamental to the development of meta-learning. The stories of my respondents reveal the co-constructive nature of the coaching relationship which is an assumption of dialogue, sensemaking

and transformative learning, but not hitherto associated with the coaching relationship. Proponents of transformative learning perceives it as a co-constructive process which takes place in the interaction between the learner and facilitator or coach, resulting in the construction of learning. This further reinforces the significance of the relationship between coach and coachee.

4. A fundamental assumption of transformative adult learning is the change which occurs in the worldview of the learner which was also identified as part of the coaching experience as described by my respondents. It includes an exploration of the values and beliefs, value judgements, feelings and assumptions the learner has about herself, others and the world in general. Transformative learning enables the learner to critically reflect on these schemas for the purpose of deconstructing existing schemas and reconstructing schemas that are more inclusive to allow changes in behaviours. The outcome of transformative learning is seen as the emancipation from perceived limited options and which may have acted as a constraining force on the life of the learner. It is evident from my research that it is perceived of equal importance in coaching. Apart from Kemp (2008), a fervent proponent of associating coaching with the learning discourse and Cox (2006) there has been no link made between coaching and transformative learning. Many of the assumptions associated with transformative learning equally apply to the coaching process as I have identified. I would go further and suggest that it is not coaching if transformative learning has not taken place. Dirkx (Dirkx, *et*

al., 2007:125) defines transformative learning as "soul work" as he perceives it involving the process whereby the learner explores her own identity, sense of self and her own subjectivity. The stories told by my respondents would suggest that such inner exploration as defined was associated with their experiences of coaching.

The Coaching Circle integrates these elements and puts forward a new heuristic of coaching as a process of sensemaking co-constructed between the coach and coachee and which is achieved through dialogue and reflected in transformative learning. I suggest that the framework provided by the theories of transformative learning aptly describes the process of coaching as experienced by my respondents. I also propose that as a well established discourse it provides a framework with which to guide both the research and practice of coaching. It is of particular relevance to the educator in creating a partnership between coaching and transformative learning to create a meaningful learning experience to adult learners.

6.6 Perceived Weaknesses

Any research project has limitations and weaknesses and this one is no different. I cannot think of a better way to sum it up than the eloquent words offered by Dearing and Murphy (1998:134), "Because we can never know enough to know what 'the truth' is." I would suggest there are two

limitations of my work have that I would identify. Firstly, this research is strongly qualitative by nature and based on social constructionism, drawing on what may be considered subjective and unreliable data. I would, however, argue that I have rigorously carried out my research in the hermeneutic tradition. It is an approach that is most suitable for an emerging field of practice (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Hence, it will be difficult to replicate this research as the relationship between researcher and research participants was a key part of this project as well as its interpretations and conclusions. However, other researchers working in a similar fashion may experience similar dynamics in their relationship with their participants and such data can inform further academic research into coaching. The involvement of the hermeneutic researcher in the subject being researched may also be perceived as a weakness. As programme leader it could be argued that I was in a position to influence my participants in a way that skewed the findings. I would, however, argue that from a constructionist perspective I played my role as did my participants in the co-constructing of the final story which emerged.

It will be clear from my philosophical approach to this research project, that I challenge the notion of 'truth' and offer with this thesis one version of a truth as to how coaching may be understood within the specific context of adult and transformative learning. Secondly, if I embarked on this journey again, I think it is true to say that I will tell a different story from the one told in these pages. It will not however be better, but it will be different.

6.7 Future Research

As a relatively young and emerging profession, there is limited rigorous research available concerning coaching and although some of the following topics have been given cursory attention by researchers, there are opportunities to push the boundaries of our understanding much further. I would suggest that each of the patterns identified by my participants as significant in their experience of coaching warrants further research and investigation. This thesis has also associated coaching with well established discourses such as sensemaking, storytelling and dialogue not hitherto explicitly or extensively identified with coaching. I would suggest that these discourses would also make significant contributions to our understanding of coaching and are worthy of further research. I would propose the following research projects as being of particular value in enhancing our understanding of coaching.

Power within the Coaching Relationships

Having identified relationship as being a critical success factor in coaching, the darker side of such relationships is worthy of further research within the discourse of coaching. Much has been written about power within relationships and as an emerging discourse, it will benefit our understanding of coaching. I have gone some way in contributing to this in a joint paper on the possible abuse of power through "storyselling" within the various

coaching relationships and to be published in a special edition of the *Journal of Management Development* in 2010.

Storytelling

I have opted for storytelling as a method for understanding the subjective experiences my participants had as a result of coaching. I suggest that further research would reveal the value of narrative and storytelling in expanding our understanding of the coaching experience. As identified by the Tamara metaphor, it will provide us with many more stories through which to understand the overall story of coaching.

Metanarrative versus Little Narratives

The scepticism with which postmodernism approaches metanarratives of truths will provide a sound basis from which the need for an overall narrative to coaching should be challenged. I would suggest that such a metanarrative would deny the creativity of co-creation between the coach and coachee and stifle experimentation and response to the needs of the individual coachee and her circumstances. I strongly suggest that this is a fundamental debate for the coaching profession to engage in.

Psychological Contract

The coaching space was time and time again put forward as being a critical element in the quality of the relationship and the experience of coaching. A number of factors were identified as being part of the creation of that special

space and some participants referred to, namely the intention, attitude and expectations of the coach. It is suggested that when the coachee and coach enter that room or that psychological space that a different set of rules apply. Some of those rules may be assumed rather than made explicit, but it is part of a psychological contract. Further research into the nature of the psychological contract as it applies to coaching will help surface the tacit and explicit expectations of such a space and the consequence of violation by either party.

6.8 Personal Reflections

As with any research undertaken, as researcher I have learnt a great deal which has deepened my understanding of the research process itself. The reflection I have engaged in has not only added to my understanding of the subject, but also a greater awareness of the assumptions and expectations I have of coaching. I have once again come face to face with the profound awareness that there is yet so much more that I need to learn and understand about what we label as coaching.

A Metanarrative of Coaching

What has emerged from my learning at a personal level is a reflection on the reference made in the literature for the need of regulation and a consistency to the practice of coaching. I concur that the emerging profession would benefit from regulation for many reasons, but express a concern that it may

also stifle creativity and innovation. I also suggest that the profession would do well to consider the scepticism associated with critical thinking, as put forward by Lyotard (1979) and introduced in earlier chapters. A critical approach would allow the emerging profession to be clear as to the consequences of creating a metanarrative of coaching. I further argue that the benefits coaching provided through the many 'little voices', Lyotard refers to, and the diversity of practices and models reflect the diversity of individuals and organisations who seek the support of coaching. One of the guiding principles of a humanistic approach to coaching as suggested by Stober (2006) is the uniqueness of the individual and the uniqueness of their personal circumstances.

Peterson (2006) argues that humans are complex and multifaceted and that a one-size-fits-all approach will fail. He also suggests that the multifaceted life of the coachee includes their interaction with their equally multifaceted life; past, present and future and their interactions with everyone and everything around them. I am of the opinion that this challenges the idea of a metanarrative of coaching and supports the need for little narratives of coaching that allows the coach and coachee to co-create the coaching environment which meets the needs of the client.

However, I support the arguments of Kemp (2008) and others who suggest that the rigorous evidence-based framework of transformative learning will allow for the standardisation of coaching. It will provide a vehicle through

which we can critically examine the cacophony of techniques and tools currently utilised in coaching, whilst allowing the flexibility necessary to meet the diverse learning needs of individual coachees. As Kemp (2008) points out, transformative learning closely mirrors the coaching process as identified by the exponents of coaching. As Whitworth *et al.* (2007) suggest coaching is not about instruction or teaching, but about facilitation and learning in a transformative manner. I will continue to pursue and contribute to the research of coaching for the purpose of deepening our understanding and knowledge of the emergent profession.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Name	Date of Interviews
MA Students	
Joe	4/1/08
Tim	11/1/08
Tony	3/1/08
Andy	16/1/08
George	7/1/08
Alan	3/1/08
Tracey	16/1/08
Ann	22/1/08
Sue	15/1/08
Shirley	28/1/08
Jan	14/1/08
Melanie	14/1/08
Students on Leadership Programme	
Madge	15/2/08
Kate	11/2/08
Stuart	21/1/08
Dave	6/2/08
Ellie	15/2/08
Ross	7/2/08
Angela	11/1/08
Interviews – Coaches	
Mike and Mandy	4/11/08
Richard	3/11/08
Focus Groups	
Student Focus Group (Leadership Programme)	11/12/08
Tim and Bob (Coaches)	1/6/09