Development of a learner focused methodology as the core of a holistic learning journey.

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Abstract

Coaching is rooted in a constructionist theory of education. This allows the individual learner to create strategies for themselves. Coaching is concerned with long-term skill development rather than with quick fixes or temporary understanding. We define coaches as those who offer inspiration, guidance, training, and modelling, and who enhance others' abilities through motivation and support.

Research was conducted over the first academic trimester, utilising two randomly mixed cohorts of twelve learners aged 16-18 studying within a Technical College. The demographic, geographic, sociological and psychographic aspects of the cohorts were well aligned. Both groups studied the Level 2 Extended Certificate in Business, a qualification offered by BTEC. Group A were exposed to coaching techniques, as the primary method of classroom management; the control group (Group B) were not.

At the end of the trimester, this research found significantly improved results within Group A when compared to Group B, specifically:

- Empower individuals by allowing them ownership of their work,

- Improve organisational and note-taking skills,

- Overcome emotional and environmental roadblocks,

- Resolve conflicts, and

- Ensure harmonious group or team work.

1. Introduction

1.1 Exeter College is a tertiary college in the city of Exeter, Devon, England, providing further education for 16-18 year old students, including apprenticeships, A levels and the International

Baccalaureate, as well as a range of courses for 14-16 year-olds, higher education and adult courses, community education and professional development courses. The learners selected were studying the BTEC Level 2 Extended Certificate in Business (finance and retail pathway) which is a full time programme lasting one year. The course entry criteria are detailed below (ref: Exeter College course entry manual 2015, page 5)

BTEC Level 2 Extended Certificate

What is it like to study this course and how will I be assessed?

This hands-on course will give you an excellent grounding in developing skills for the business sector. Work is assessed through a combination of external and internal assessment. You will learn through hands-on experience, practical work, lectures, presentations and group work.

Depending on qualifications at entry, you will continue to study GCSE or Functional Skills in both maths and English.

A BTEC Level 2 Extended Certificate is equivalent to three GCSEs grades A* to C.

What topics will I study?

You will study 12 units with core, mandatory and optional units designed to develop your skills and knowledge in Business to include the following:

- Enterprise in the Business World
- Finance for Business
- Principles in Marketing
- Principles of Customer Service
- Visual merchandising in Retail Business
- Building Successful Business Teams

What experiences will I get?

You will take part in work experience and business visits, as well as initiatives such as interview preparation and role plays.

What are the entry requirements?

You will need a minimum of four GCSE D grades or equivalent, including maths and English (or Functional Skills maths & English at Level 1), and an interest in a Business related career such as Retail or Finance.

What can I study alongside this course?

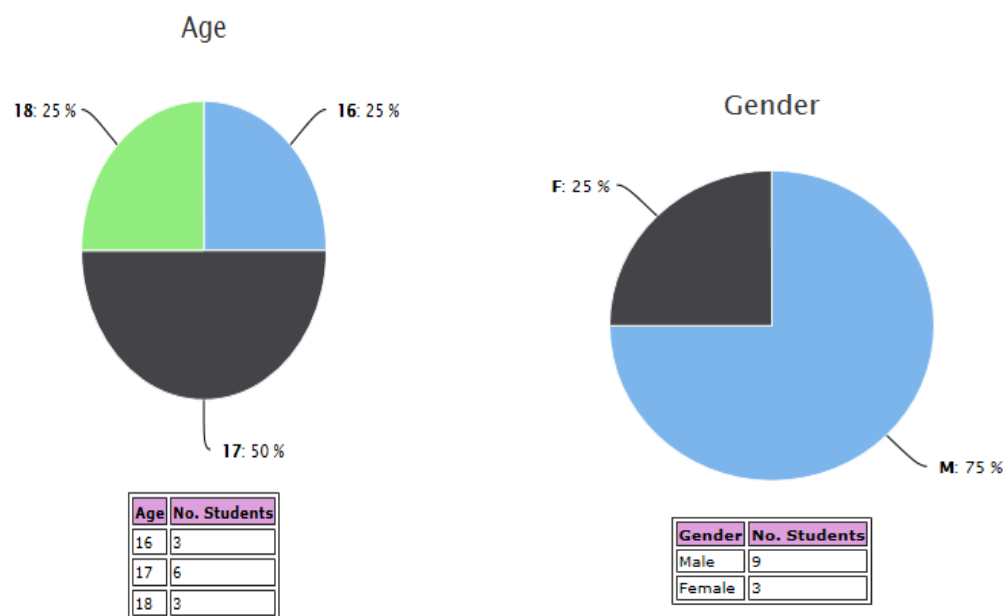This course is studied on its own and cannot be combined with other courses except for maths or English.

What can the course lead on to?

You could go on to study a Level 3 course or apply for an Apprenticeship.

1.2 Group Profiles

In summary the student demographic in Group A was 75% male and 25% female and Group B was 77% male. Although the age ranges in Group A skewed towards 16-17 and in Group B 16-18 – the demographic was broadly comparable.

Group A:

Age

18: 25 %   16: 25 %

17: 50 %

Age	No. Students
16	3
17	6
18	3

Gender

F: 25 %

M: 75 %

Gender	No. Students
Male	9
Female	3

Group B:

Age

18: 30.8 %   16: 46.2 %

17: 23.1 %

Age	No. Students
16	6
17	3
18	4

Gender

F: 23.1 %

M: 76.9 %

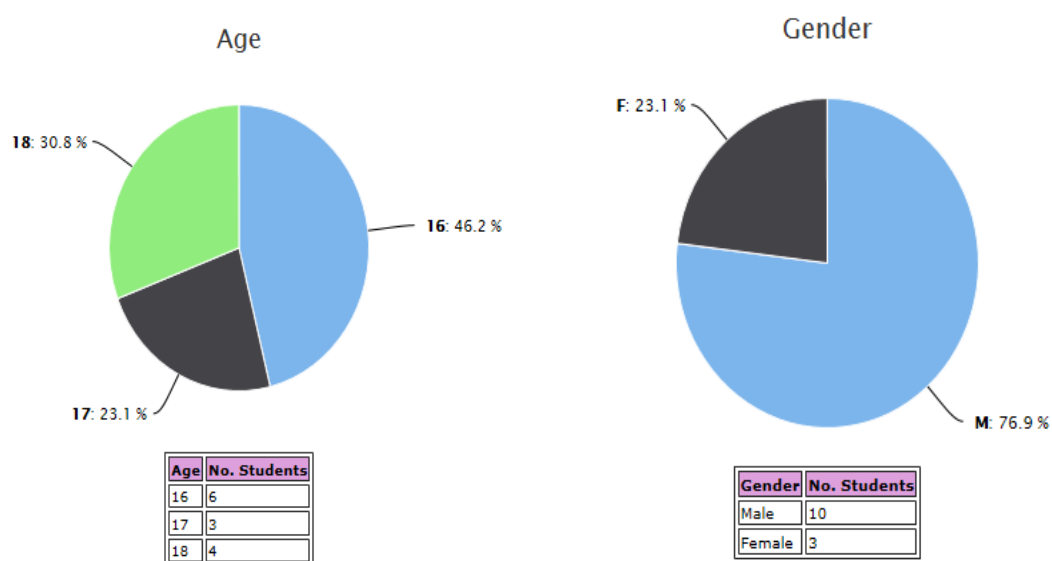| Gender	No. Students
Male	10
Female	3

Figure 1: Demographic of Group A and B compared

1.3 The changes to BTEC qualifications

BTECs are evolving; informed by recent policy development, including the *review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report (March 2011)* and the *Study Programmes for 16-19 year olds* consultation (June2012), a new suite of BTEC firsts were introduced:

- In 2013, BTEC announced that it will be introducing the first of the new Level 2 qualifications in eight key subjects - Applied Science, Art & Design, **Business**, Engineering, Health & Social Care, IT, Performing Arts, and Sport - plus the new Level 3 qualification in Children's Play, Learning and Development.

- BTEC are introducing appropriate external assessment for each subject. This will not always be an exam, but will be rigorous whilst still remaining true to the unique teaching and learning experience of the BTEC.

- BTEC are introducing new Quality Assurance support to help teachers understand the qualification standard, support BTEC Assessors in their internal assessment work, and ultimately to ensure that the work of every BTEC learner, every BTEC Assessor and every BTEC centre is visible and evaluated on during the life of the programme.

This new suite introduces additional features which impact significantly on the traditional assessment methodology associated with the BTEC qualification. This includes **external assessment** appropriate to the sector and a BTEC work submission process which formalises and limits the submissions and support during assessment for a unit made by the learner.

BTEC issued a 'Guide to Internal Assessment for BTEC Firsts and Nationals' to support this change (fig 2).
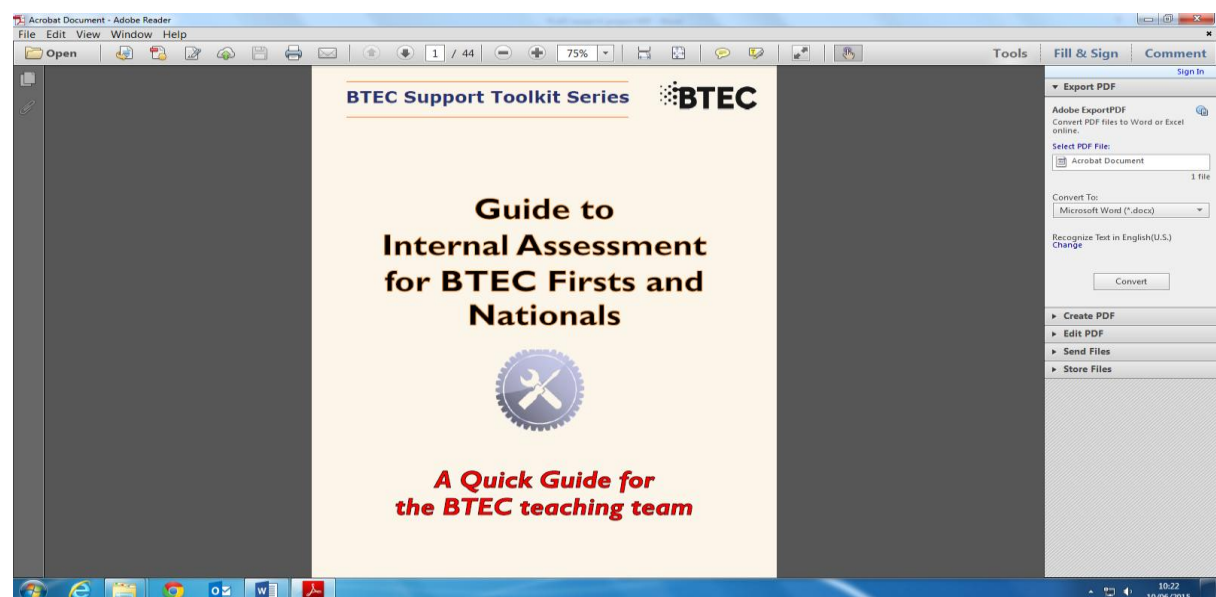
http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/BTEC-Firsts/Business/2012/Internal-assessments/Guide_to_Int_Assessmt_for_BTEC_Firsts_and_Nats_Business.pdf

Figure 2: Guide to Internal Assessment for BTEC Firsts and Nationals

Exeter College led a BTEC conference to inform staff prior of the changes and adopted a standardised quality approach to documentation. A key document was the BTEC work submission process (fig 3).
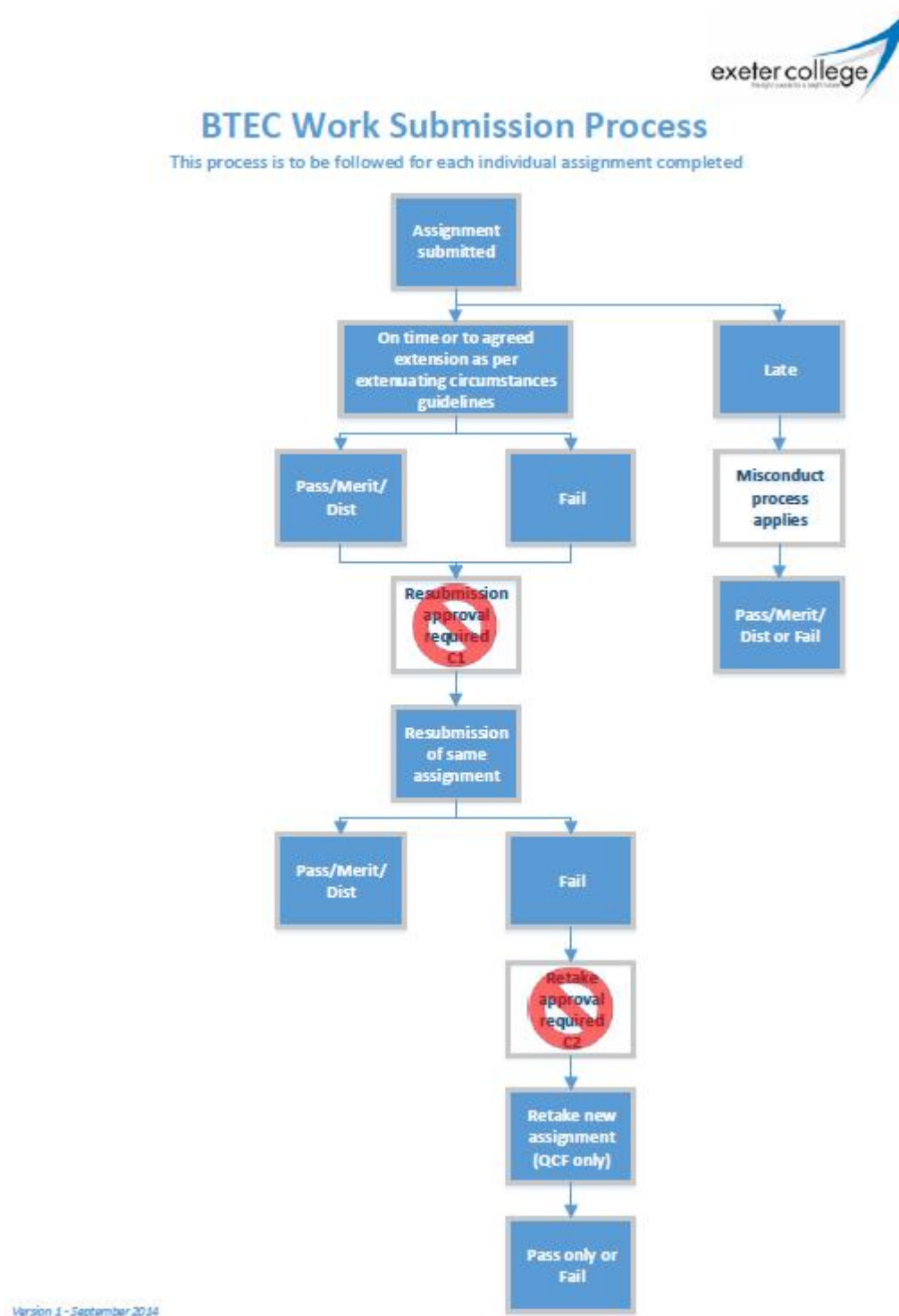

Figure 3: BTEC Work Submission Process

1.4 Paradigm Shift in teaching and learning

This research was needed to support a cultural change in traditional teaching practice to engender ownership and independence in learners driven by the new BTEC methodology.

Learners: The evidence learners submit for assessment must always be their own work. This means that, during the teaching and learning phase, students should learn to:

- **Make the decisions** and
- **Demonstrate capacity for independent learning**

In order to help them achieve the assessment criteria. (Fig 2: Guide to Internal Assessment for BTEC Firsts and Nationals, page 6)

Before starting an assessment each learner needs to understand the assessment requirements, the nature of the evidence they need to produce and the importance of time management and meeting deadlines.

For students to learn how to independently figure things out after the instruction, teaching staff need to resist the urge to immediately satisfy their questions. It can be almost automatic to "help" a student find the page in the textbook, locate the resources, look up a definition. But sometimes our instantaneous help actually increases student dependency. We allow our students to transfer the thinking work to us.

Furthermore, the inclusion of **external assessment** necessitates the need for increased independence in the learner.

This research was focused on the Level 2 cohorts because the BTEC change was initiated for all Level 2 groups at the start of this academic year (2014). The research was focused on Unit 9, a marketing unit which is externally assessed using a paper-based exam; the assessment must be taken by the learner under exam conditions. The exam is set and marked by Pearson, lasts for 1 hour, 30 minutes and contains 50 marks; all questions are compulsory. The first assessment opportunity for this unit is January each year, with only one further opportunity in May. The academic year is split into trimesters, to align with the external assessment framework and to offer the best opportunity to the learners, unit 9 was taught in the first trimester. The research was focused on this demographic and timeline to capture this unique opportunity.

Teachers/Staff: The new assessment rules help to reinforce independence in learners by directing the teaching team to make a clear separation between:

- The **feedback given during teaching and learning** and
- **Support, supervision and feedback during and following assessment**. (Fig 2: Guide to Internal Assessment for BTEC Firsts and Nationals, page 7)

Most teachers, teach, instruct and mentor at some point in the classroom – whether sharing their experience or telling and influencing students to take next steps. Not many teachers can say they are integrating coaching into their practice. In fact, few of us would be able to give a clear definition. Augmentation would be reliant on clear understanding of the differences and appropriateness of the methodology within the teaching context. Therefore staff involvement and the coaching skills existent therein; is integral to the research.

The Rules for BTEC assessment state:

The teacher or tutor must decide when the learner is fully prepared to undertake the assessment. Once learners are working on assignments which they will submit for assessment, **they must work independently** to produce and prepare evidence for assessment. Once the learner begins work for the assessment, the tutor must not:

- Provide specific assessment feedback on evidence produced by the learner before it is submitted for assessment
- Confirm achievement of specific assessment criteria until the assessment stage. (Fig 2: Guide to Internal Assessment for BTEC Firsts and Nationals, page 7)

To align with this methodology, and conversely increase independence in learners, using coaching techniques in the classroom needs to be common practice, facilitating the development of coaching skills in staff will ultimately impact on learners. This research is needed to support a cultural change in traditional teaching practice to engender ownership in learners.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Learners: The research focused on the leaners began on the first day of the academic year 8th September 2014 and continued until the end of the first trimester; 17th December 2014. The external exam took place on the 8th January. The research and control cohorts were identified and teaching and learning started on the 15th September 2014. Coaching techniques were used as the primary method of classroom management with cohort A and traditional teaching methods with cohort B. They were studying the same unit, covered the same content and ultimately prepared for the same external assessment.

The settings in which the teaching took place are comparable, both classrooms had SMART boards, a central space with tables and chairs, IT facilities (approximately 20 computers with access to the internet) and wall space to display work.(Figure 4 Classrooms 109 and 114)

Classroom 114   **Classroom 109**

Figure 4: Classrooms 109 and 114

All learners had access to pads/paper, pens and the BTEC course book.

2.2 Cohort A:

Coaching techniques were used as the primary method of classroom management. Opportunities were created for individuals and teams to further develop and improve their skills. Observation and identification of ways to enhance both individual and team performance and the provision of specific feedback were common place.

Several different coaching strategies were used. The situation determined which of the strategies was most appropriate. A few of the most common coaching strategies are described below:

- **Instructing** occurs when students have a new responsibility or are learning a new skill. Using questioning as a primary method to establish transferrable knowledge and make connections.

- **Directing or guiding** is used when students have the necessary skills, but need to know how to apply their skills. The coach cannot do the transfer of knowledge for them, but can act as a guide along the way as they are trying to apply skills that they have learned. Using observation, specific feedback and questioning techniques.

- **Reflecting** is appropriate when students know what to do and how to do it, but they need support to accomplish the task. This is an ideal time to build their confidence and encourage them through positive reinforcement. Reminding the learners what they know already and reflecting their success to date.
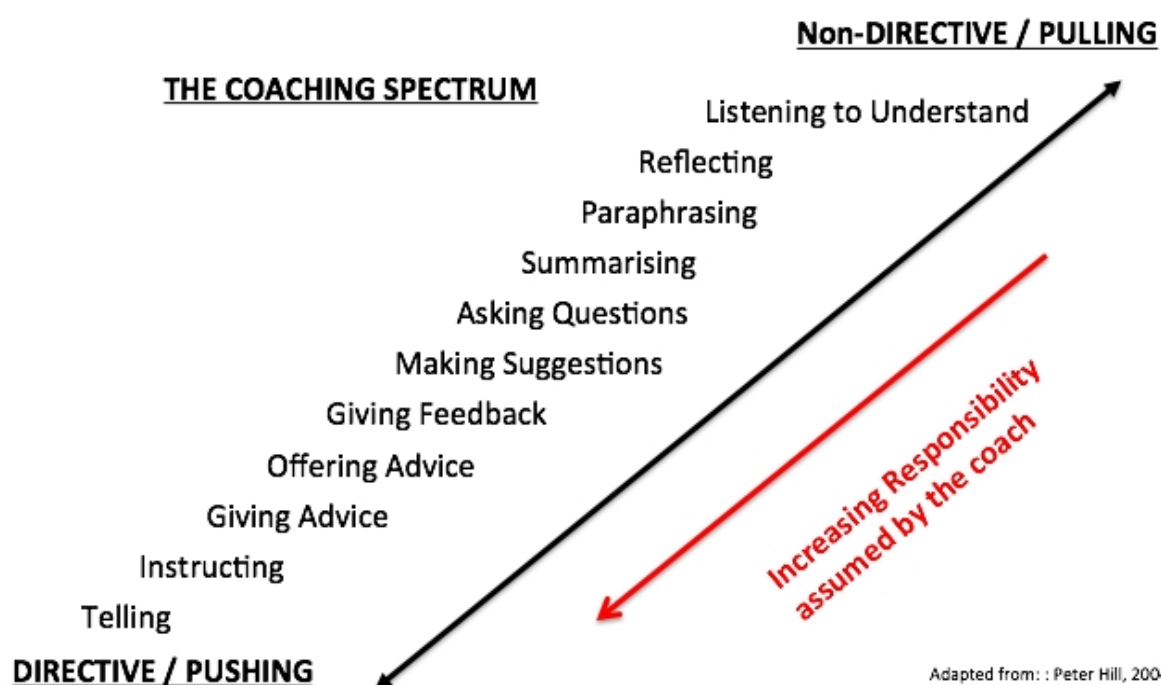

Figure 5: Coaching Spectrum

I predominately operated in the top end of the spectrum – using non-directive techniques. I utilised a ball to signify ownership or where responsibility lay. The ball was a metaphor used to engage the cohort with the new techniques. The ball became a symbol and a visual representation of who was leading the learning.

2.3 Cohort B:

Traditional teaching techniques were used as the primary method of classroom management. I retained the customary role of controlling the learning environment. I maintained power and responsibility and played the role of instructor (in the form of planned sessions) and decision maker (in regards to curriculum content and specific outcomes). Learners were regarded as having 'knowledge holes' that need to be filled with information. The style was weighted towards "transmission" activities, such as, teacher led questions and/or activities, listening to the teacher talk about the topic and/or copy notes from the power point. I predominately operated in the bottom end of the spectrum, telling and instructing.

2.4 Staff:

Facilitating the development of staff and essentially, (for research purposes), benchmarking understanding and skills of staff regarding coaching started in September during the staff development day. I planned and led a staff session (figure 5 Power point from the staff development session with link)
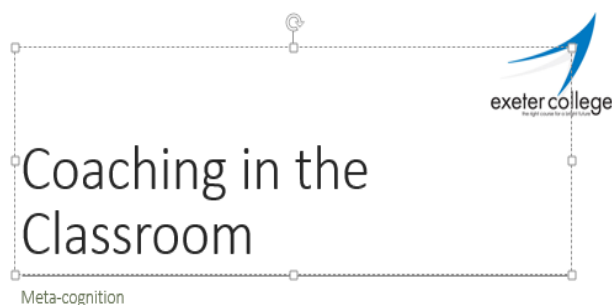
https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_6b2EjpNk4vUFdHU1hVMWZwZkU/view?usp=sharing

Figure 6: – Staff development session and link

Coaching techniques were modelled and subsequently practiced throughout these sessions. Five sessions with access to 70 staff from September 2014 – June 2015, were held. The metaphor of the ball was introduced and continued as a vehicle to communicate learner independence and the introduction of coaching strategies. A green card (green represents a best practice coaching technique or question) or red card (red represents a teacher led, didactic approach) were used during the sessions to indicate the movement from traditional techniques to coaching techniques. A stop, start, continue template was used during the plenary activity to encourage reflection and bias the attendees to uplift coaching into their practice. The session was fine-tuned based on learning from the research project and feedback from staff. Staff left the session with a ball and three self-generated coaching questions for use in practice.
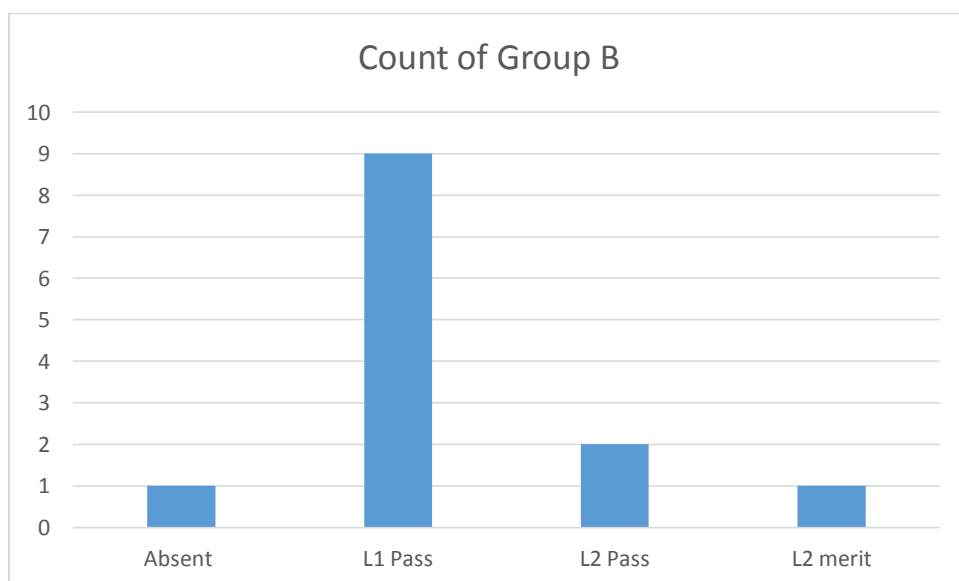
3. Results – (Achievement)

3.1 Quantitative Outcomes

The external exam was taken by cohort A and B on the 8th January 2015. The target for all learners is to achieve a L2 pass. In group A; a total of 11 learners sat the exam, 6 of whom achieved or exceeded the target, with the other 5 achieving a L1 pass. (Figure 6: Group A results)
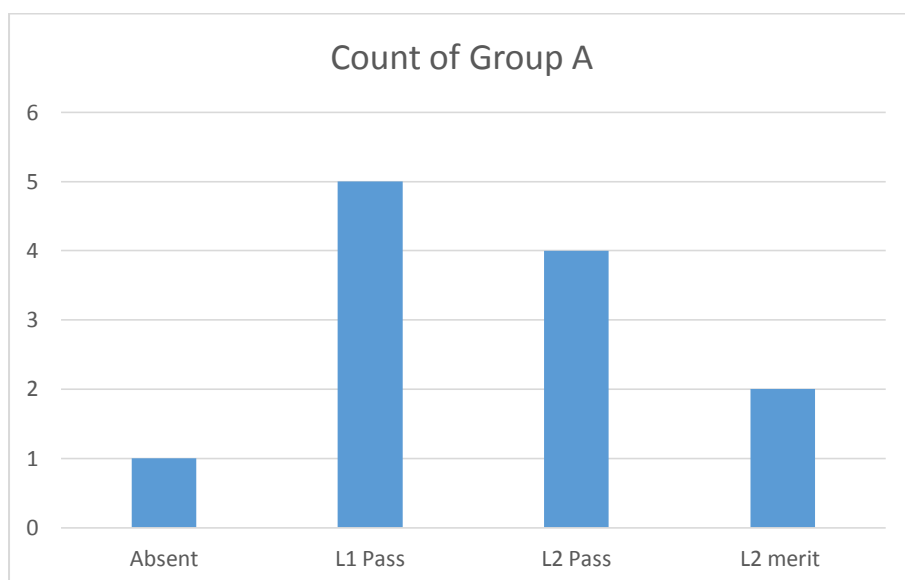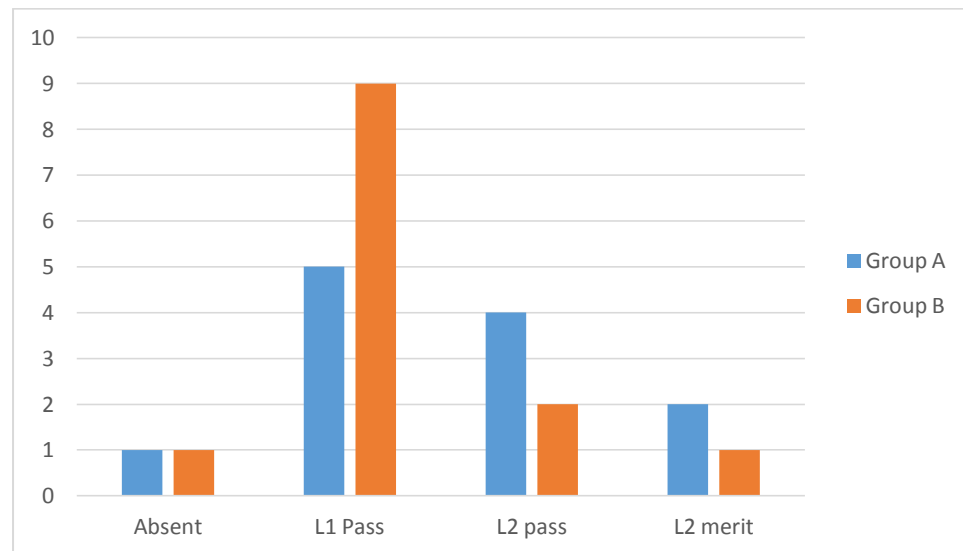

Figure 6: Group A results

In group B; a total of 12 learners sat the exam, 3 of whom met or exceeded the target, with the other 9 achieving a L1 pass (Figure 7: Group B results)

Figure 7: Group B results

The comparison of group A and Group B clearly shows that 50% more learners in cohort A achieved or exceeded the target grade.

Figure 8: Comparison of Group A and B results

All learners achieved a pass, there were no fails in either cohort.

Results – (Learning)

3.2 Qualitative Outcomes

A sample from the research group (cohort A) were interviewed by the researcher, 3 questions were consistently used as a framework:

1. What did you notice about Gill's (the researcher) teaching?
2. What effect did this have on your learning?
3. What skills did you take from that, into the future?

Other questions naturally arose or extension questions were asked to clarify or probe further during the individual interview.

(Figure 9, 10 and 11 V log interviews with learners A, B and C)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_6b2EjpNk4vQS1qQkhsaU5CUFE/view?pli=1
Figure 9: Learner A

Figure 10: Learner B

Figure 11: Learner C

3.3 Staff outcomes

There seems to be no common agreement over the use of terms in the arena of differentiating coaching, mentoring and teaching and this leads to inevitable confusion. Sometimes different terms are used to refer to a single concept and sometimes one term may be used to refer to differing concepts. This situation is not made easier by the fact that different terms may be used in different educational or vocational contexts. For example a member of the sports faculty may perceive coaching in a very different way to others based on their background and use of interchangeable language. This was the first outcome of working with staff. It became evident that establishing an 'institutional' agreement regarding coaching and the skills implied by the understanding of the term would be key. Post staff-attendance feedback qualified the view that clarity was needed to ensure institutional understanding of coaching and the collective skills involved. Feedback was sought from all attendees (70 staff) with 85% of attendees mentioning 'understanding differences' as a factor in what they enjoyed or found useful about the session. (Figure 12: sample of feedback from staff development sessions).

Staff were able to identify and reflect at an individual level 'stop, start and continue' behaviours which was an activity completed at the end of every session. They in effect benchmarked their current style and classroom practice, compared it to coaching methods, and action planned what they were going to do to integrate coaching into their practice. This strongly suggests that before coaching can be integrated to promote learner independence - agreement on definitions and application style is needed amongst practitioners.

What did you enjoy about the session
The session was delivered in an upbeat and constructive manner. It was very useful for me, understanding the difference between teaching, mentoring and coaching was very well explained.
Enthusiasm and passion and key differences.
Energy and enthusiasm of the teacher. Useful information showing key differences between teaching, mentoring and coaching.
It was informative and lively. Coaching questions and the difference – ask, don't tell.
Very interesting and well-thought out. The difference between coaching and other methods.
Excellent delivery, enthusiastic and knowledgeable about topic. Whose ball is it? Really enjoyed it!!!

Figure 12: Sample of feedback from staff development

4. Discussion

4.1 Why now?

A number of strands have converged currently to support the value of **coaching** as a component within the development of a learner focused methodology. The evidence strongly supports the premise that **coaching** methodologies promote independence in learners. This research takes coaching as an approach to teaching and learning which, in the context of widening access and acquiring skills for life-long learning, values and promotes the development of learner autonomy or learner independence. It is a practice where learners move away from dependence on the teacher and become independent and self-reliant.

In the 2008 DCSF Independent learning literature review, a key finding was, that there are many definitions in operation regarding independent learning.

All these different terms describe very similar themes and processes, principally: pupils having an understanding of their learning; being motivated to take responsibility for their learning; and working with teachers to structure their learning environment.
There is a consensus in the literature that independent learning does not merely involve pupils working alone. The important role teachers can play in enabling and supporting independent learning is stressed. Learners cannot become independent when the teacher retains the power and responsibility for the learner. Using **coaching** when teaching and facilitating learning can aid the transition of learners from dependence to independence and subsequently have many benefits, they can be summarised as follows:

- Learners take responsibility for their own learning and learn to learn;

- They develop key transferable skills (e.g. study, time-management, IT, interpersonal skills etc.);

- They actively manage their learning; seeking out learning opportunities and use appropriate learning strategies;

The flexibility of the promotion of independent learning methodologies coincides with a political agenda to promote lifelong learning and widen access to non-traditional learners.

For this research specifically in answer to why now? – The change in BTEC assessment methods provided a platform to promote coaching as a tool to enhance learner autonomy.

4.2 Limitations

The researcher recognises that while traditional teaching methods were the primary mode of working with group B, she has a natural tendency to adopt a coaching style, so it is likely that this inherent style was evident during some of the contact time with group B. In the research presented here, the conscious competence of the researcher to adhere to the controls of the research would have negated this 'slip back' to intrinsic preferences.

The research was conducted during the first trimester when it may be easier to establish new norms. The learners were coming from secondary school where there is a high level of dependency on 'the teacher'; this could infer that they expect more of the same, or the transition to college may signify that they should expect the status quo to change. Ancillary factors, such as previous experience of learning, whether they have a part time job and their family relationships could influence their ability to manage the increased autonomy given.

The Business faculty; through a departmental training session engaged with coaching principles and adopted these to a greater or lesser degree. Consistency of using coaching methods as the main form of classroom management could not be controlled within the faculty or individual teaching staff. Both cohorts were also taught maths and English by teaching staff external to the Business faculty who had not been exposed to the training.

4.3 Unexpected Outcomes

The use of the ball; and the metaphor to communicate and introduce coaching, accelerated the 'light bulb' moment. The ball as a physical manifestation assisted the 'shift' into coaching mode. It was powerful with both staff and learners, and was central to maintaining good practice and re-establishing coaching norms when contact had been minimal and natural habits/preferences re-emerged. When introducing the coaching style, this signaled to learners that they were entering a period when they would be their own problem-solvers. Over time, they were able to withstand longer periods of uncertainty as they built up both their tolerance for ambiguity and willingness to lead. When tempted to throw them a lifeline, the ball would also serve as a reminder to the researcher; staff found this particularly useful, trusting the process, which resulted in students' perseverance improving and ultimately they learned to think through things for themselves, and ways to get help from each other.

The ball also lowered resistance to change in both staff and students – learners who just wanted to be 'told' resisted the change of style until the ball was introduced, at this time, their motivation to have the ball outweighed their reluctance to participate. Staff did not generally find the shift to coaching difficult, the challenge was stopping doing what they were currently doing – 'telling'. Staff were able to hold themselves in the 'new' style longer, when using the ball to clarify in their own minds, the most beneficial outcome in terms of learning.

4.4 Metacognition – Overarching theory

Metacognition is defined as higher-order thinking that enables understanding, analysis, and control of one's cognitive processes, especially when engaged in learning. Research on metacognition had its origins in the 1970s work of Flavell (1976, 1979) and another prominent developmental psychologist, Ann Brown (1943–1999). They emphasised the particularly important role that metacognition plays in promoting transfer of learning. That is, students can more readily apply knowledge acquired in one context to another context if they have more awareness of themselves as learners, if they monitor their strategies and resources, and if they assess their readiness for tests and other performances.

Metacognition is a key factor in learning that should be deliberately cultivated.

In justifying this principle Flavell and Brown (1979) the authors noted that instructional approaches that foster metacognition can enhance not only student learning but also student responsibility for learning. Using coaching as a vehicle to increase metacognition principles would bridge the change that is need to generate independent learners (Livingston, et al 1996). As teachers we too often get trapped in the role of imparting knowledge, when it has been proven that it is more useful to arm them with the skills to learn. Learners can then differentiate for themselves.

Vygotsky's theory (Vygotsky, L. S. 1978) provides the foundation for contemporary classroom interventions that begin with explicit instruction on the part of the teacher, followed by modelling and guided practice of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, with a gradual release of responsibility to the student. This scaffolding approach could be accelerated using coaching methods.

Piaget's theory (Jean Piaget 1896-1980) has been built upon by contemporary researchers, including Palincsar and Brown, (Palincsar, Ransom, & Derber, 1989). to reveal that peer discussion and collaboration help students to monitor their own understanding and build new strategic capabilities

Constructionist learning is inspired by the constructivist theory that individual learners construct mental models in order to understand the world around them. Constructivism advocates student-centered, discovery learning where students use information they already know to acquire more knowledge. Students learn through participation in project-based learning where they make connections between different ideas and areas of knowledge facilitated by the teacher through **coaching** rather than using lectures or step-by-step guidance.

5. **Conclusion**

In an organisational context, this shift in emphasis necessarily affects the role of the classroom teacher, who will need to take into account the entire learning experience of the student as a critical component of their own teaching style. It is not sufficient to presume that if teachers teach, learners will learn.

The design of the curriculum is crucial to the successful implementation or otherwise of independent learning and the teaching practices which result. Therefore a curriculum which values the development of independent learning and makes time and space for it within the academic timetable, will foster success. Furthermore, the research presented here indicates that a teacher training programme which places facilitation and coaching in the classroom as a norm, will ensure future practitioners have the skills to facilitate life-long independent learning skills within their

students. In conclusion, this work supports the hypothesis that coaching methodology enhances outcomes for students and practitioners alike. It should be noted that this research has been conducted on a relatively small cohort within a narrow student demographic hence further research is warranted, specifically the development additional classroom strategies within a broader demographic and larger cohorts in order to optimise the significant potential this methodology offers.

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