

Developing an equity lens: the experience of creating a professional framework for coaches and mentors

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Abstract

The following is a collective practitioner reflection on creating a coaching and mentoring professional framework for a pilot student support service that focuses on delivering targets in the institutional Access and Participation Strategy. Both coaching and mentoring are increasingly recognised as support mechanisms which can bring about change for social justice (Shoukry and Cox, 2018). As Learning Development practitioners, we are working within a specialist coaching and mentoring service which seeks to remove student inequalities. Therefore, working to create a professional framework which addresses this directly has been valuable. We share our journey in the hope that other Learning Development practitioners will consider an equity lens to critically reflect on their work and join a conversation to develop anti-oppressive practice in student support further.

Keywords: coaching and mentoring; equity lens; widening participation; student support; professional framework; anti-oppressive practice.

Organisational context

Our team of coaches and mentors deliver support to students as part of a wider institutional aim to achieve equity in student experiences and outcomes. This tailored support takes place in both one-to-one and group settings – typically over the course of a module. Like other Learning Developers, as coaches and mentors we are ultimately seeking to ‘legitimise’ the different skills, experiences, and knowledge our students have and ‘widen opportunity, not participation’ (ALDinHE, 2022). Working within the coaching and mentoring space, our professional practice is also necessarily aligned to the standards and competencies set out by bodies such as the International Coaching Federation (ICF). In this project, we reflected critically on how to bring this into dialogue with Learning Development roles in higher education (HE), and anti-oppressive practice more broadly.

More specifically, we aimed to:

- Establish coaching and mentoring for equity in HE for practitioners from a range of professional backgrounds (Evans and Lines, 2014).
- Identify core skills and competencies to support student equity whilst remaining open to different approaches (Ives, 2008).
- Recognise societal context and the impact of interventions beyond study (Spencer, 2021).
- Centre our learning from students and ensure our practice is ‘anti-oppressive’ in that it is designed to foreground student narratives, stories, and experiences (hooks, 1994, cited Valcarlos et al., 2020).

Our approach

We looked outwards to existing frameworks set out by the International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2022), the European Coaching and Mentoring Council (EMCC Global, 2022), and beyond (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2014; Megginson and Clutterbuck, 2015; Passmore and Sinclair, 2020; Passmore, 2021), as well as those within the coaching and mentoring continuum (Clutterbuck, 2014; Thedman, 2018). Although equitable practice is considered in the literature, equity was neither centrally embedded into these frameworks nor had they been created with this in mind. The benefits of using

coaching and mentoring approaches in mutuality have been largely discussed in the context of staff development in education, rather than as a student-facing approach (Hobson and van Nieuwerburgh, 2022).

We turned to our institution's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) work to contextualise our practice which provided a foundation for the 'why' of what we wanted to achieve. It became clear that an institutional commitment to meaningful, equitable change was key, as was a readiness to listen to marginalised voices and stories. Without this, coaching and mentoring approaches may risk encouraging individual adaptation to inequitable structures instead of challenging and supporting change (Shoukry, 2016; Tichavakunda, 2019).

Our collective experience working with students to-date had showed us the value of:

- Holding space for deep storytelling.
- Validating students' lived experiences.
- Being comfortable with uncertainty.
- Advocating for students.
- Reflecting upon biases and privileges.
- Communicating challenges and feeding back to communities of practice, the institution, and systems to effect change.

This desk exercise showed the value of:

- A person-centred approach (Joseph, 2006).
- Flexibility and adaptiveness to individual needs (Clutterbuck, 2014; Megginson and Clutterbuck, 2015).
- Acknowledging practitioner privilege (Terry, 2021; Chiu, 2022) and bias (Orange et al., 2019).
- A coaching and mentoring continuum recognising student and practitioner needs (Sheath, 2013).

This further encouraged our resolve to reframe coaching and mentoring practice through an 'equity lens'.

An equity lens

An equity lens is needed to recognise that coaching is not neutral (Shoukry and Cox, 2018) and to avoid a potential 'deficit' approach (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020, p.541). We explored the use of 'equity coaching' in alternative contexts such as public health interventions (Terry, 2021), the criminal justice system, and primary/secondary education. In HE, an equity lens for coaching and mentoring focussed on developing managers and leaders (Bocala and Holman, 2021; Vlachopoulous, 2021; Mathew and Hakro, 2022), and student interventions such as peer coaching (Andreanoff, 2016) or online group coaching (Algozzini, 2017).

The equity lens made explicit the social justice motivations behind coaching and mentoring. This proactive inclusionary and equalising stance draws from emancipatory (Western, 2012; Shoukry, 2016), anti-racist (Roche and Passmore, 2021; Roche and Passmore, 2022), and anti-oppressive approaches, to transform traditional coaching and mentoring.

Having contextualised the framework in our own institution's EDI work and the wider HE landscape, as well as in the equity work being undertaken in the coaching and mentoring sector, we then turned towards building our 'what' and 'how'. Reflecting on 'what' we do and how to embed this into our framework involved critical self-evaluation of our practice and our service, giving us a foundation for creating an approach that would work effectively for our aims. As an outcome, we created a coaching and mentoring continuum which emphasises the mutuality of both skillsets and how these can be used fluidly to adapt to student need. Next, we turned to the 'how' of our framework: how does this continuum operate and facilitate ongoing anti-oppressive practice? Key to answering these questions is the team's adoption of a person-centred approach that enables deep storytelling while using supportive challenge to create change. We are also increasingly attuned to the power of language and dominant Western discourses, identity, and intersectionality (Blaisdell, 2018).

Barriers and future considerations

This process challenged normative approaches, recognised gaps in the literature and held a mirror up to our own practices. Further considerations to develop this work include:

- Championing the student voice in the framework's development and our practice.
- Learning from others offering equity-based coaching and mentoring in HE.
- Reflecting on our team's diversity and lived experiences.

We are now at the point of compiling the framework and preparing it for presentation. The next stage of our process is wider consultation with practitioners, stakeholders, and – most importantly – our students.

Concluding reflections

Creating this framework has given us the opportunity to connect our values, practice, and purpose, and to unite them under an approach that places equity at its heart. It is a framework that is functional, exploratory, and anti-oppressive; and that seeks to meet the need of practitioners and stakeholders. Collaboratively creating a framework by reflecting on our practice and putting this under an equity lens has been a challenging but rewarding process. It continually enhances our work as practitioners, contributes to our community of practice, and will help to develop the service. We hope our reflections encourage other Learning Developers to view their own practice through an equity lens and share their experiences with the wider community of practice.

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Helen Williams started her career as a Geography teacher in secondary schools in Bradford just over twenty years ago. Following this she worked in a consultancy, coaching, and management capacity within a local authority, the NHS, and Teach First. Committed to life-long learning in the service of supporting and developing others, she holds a MA in Special Educational Needs, PGDip HR Management, PGCert Healthcare Leadership, and an ILM Level 5 Certificate in Mentoring and Coaching.

Jo Blissett has over 20 years' experience as a Human Resources and Learning Development professional. As a Staff Development Coach, she saw first-hand how individuals benefit from coaching; Jo has taken this knowledge and experience into higher education. She delivers a variety of coaching and mentoring activities to support student development. In 2010 she qualified as a Career Coach, completing the Postgraduate Qualification in Careers Guidance (QCG). Jo joined the Open University as a Personal Learning Advisor in 2021. She is passionate and determined to address structural, process, and opportunity inequalities that affect students in higher education.

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