

Research as “Expertising”: A Reading Guide for Practicing Coaches¹

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Practicing coaches have been challenged (Grant, 2004) to become both informed consumers and producers of research in order to establish coaching as a full profession. A model of “expertising” is presented as a guide to utilizing research to increase individual coaching mastery. Specific guidelines are introduced to make reading research more accessible for coaches who are unaware of the conventions for reporting research results. The developing field of coaching studies is compared to a complex system that responds to challenges such as those research presents by organizing at a higher level of performance.

At the First ICF Research Symposium, keynote speaker Anthony Grant issued a challenge to individual coaches and to coaching as a whole: if coaching is to develop as a profession, it must establish itself as a field of study made up both of producers and of informed consumers of research (Grant, 2004).

The field of coaching studies¹ is in a good position to meet this challenge and avoid the gap between practitioners and researchers that marked psychotherapy for many years (Page 2002). The very nature of coaching has been influenced by trends (Page, 2003) that have also had an effect on scientific research: a greater acceptance of the principle of individual uniqueness and creativity, systems thinking, rejection of body-mind duality, moving away from hierarchical assumptions, and an emphasis on human factors in order to balance technological advances.

However timely a research-coaching conversation may be, the practicing coach who is not currently engaged in research or academic studies may feel that reading research papers and articles in scholarly journals is a daunting task. This paper is intended to provide encouragement and tools to make the “informed consumer” task less daunting and more engaging for the individual coach. The “producer” and technical aspects of understanding research are covered

elsewhere in this volume (see Kauffman, *in press*). I will also discuss the implications of the research challenge for the field of coaching studies as a whole.

“Expertising” as an Approach to the Research Challenge

The motivation for a coach to accept the research challenge has to be more personal than an external requirement for the field to become a “real” profession. Thus, it would be consistent with coaching practice to start our conversation about reading research with the question: “What do we want?” In this case, “What do we want from our engagement with research?”

One likely answer for a coaching practitioner would be to become a better coach, ultimately a masterful or expert coach. Many of the papers in this volume pursue this goal by investigating how and whether coaching works in different settings and for different groups of people, and knowledge of the results of these studies may improve any coaching to which they are relevant. But in addition to the contribution to mastery made by the *content* of research studies, there is a *process*, an attitude, a general stance that furthers mastery, no matter what specific content it is applied to.

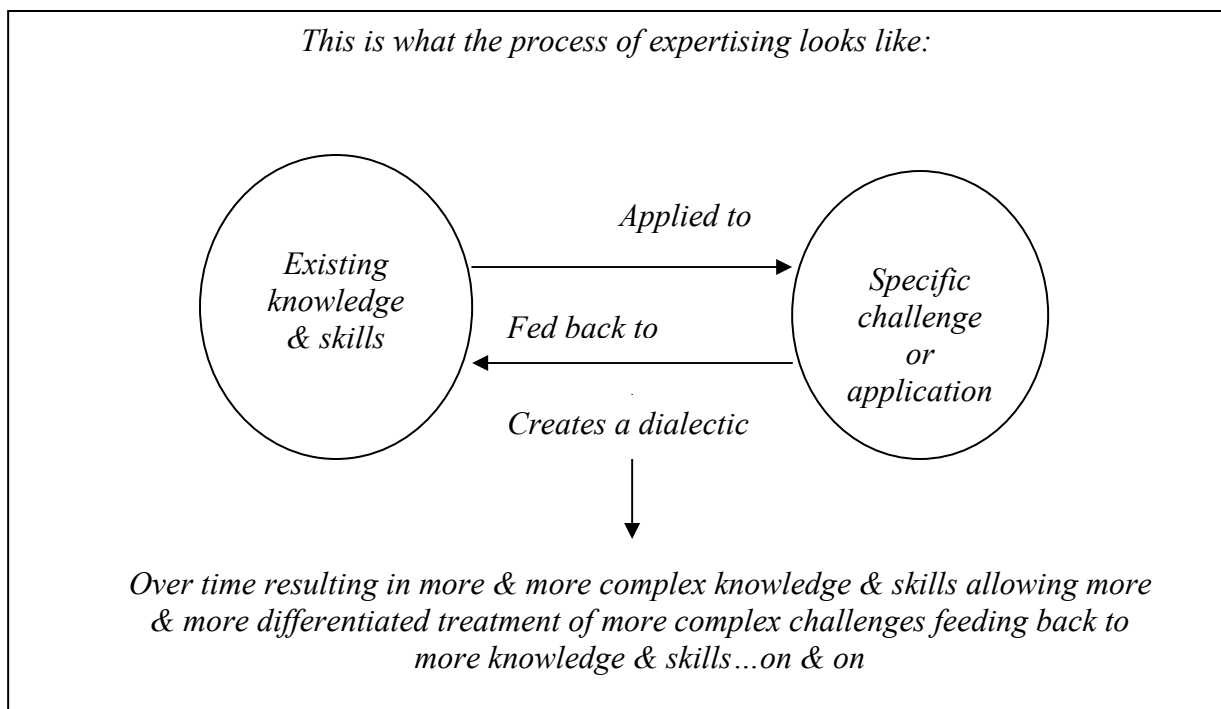
Studies of individuals who are universally acknowledged as masters in many different fields show that while many qualities may be associated with expertise—talent, skill, knowledge, specialization, credentialing, fame, age, experience, authority—they are not the same as expertise (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; de Groot, 1965; Ericsson & Smith, 1991).

It takes about 10,000 hours of practice, or 10 years averaging some 20 hours per week, to become an expert in any area of knowledge or field studied so far. Yet not everyone who is well-practiced becomes a master of what they practice. We could imagine a coach reading hundreds or even thousands of research reports without ever having them affect his or her mastery of coaching. What is the difference?

Expertise is not about what people *know* or the skills they *have*—or the stacks of notes they may have taken on research articles—it is about what they *do* with their knowledge and skills. It is a process, something we engage in, not something we possess (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993).

That is why I believe a true understanding of expertise requires us to use it as a verb, not a noun. Masters *expertise* or are *expertising* insofar as they are engaging in this process. Figure 1 is a model of that process. The model is limited by being static whereas the process itself is a dynamic one, with knowledge and skills being applied to a specific challenging experience and with that experience feeding back to knowledge and skills in a dialectical process that creates an ever-expanding capacity to deal with ever more complex and demanding tasks.

Figure 1. The Process of Expertising²



Applying this model to the challenge of reading a particular research paper means that we both engage what we already know in order to assess the relevance of the research, and we are open to learning from what we are reading. We then apply what we have learned to our coaching practice and learn from that experience, all of which we bring to our next coaching and our next reading experiences.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) claim that the subjective experience of expertising is what Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow” (1990). Flow is a state of mind that comes from willingly taking on a challenge. It occurs “...when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (p. 3).

Our minds, and even the structure of our brains, are stimulated to grow in complexity as we face challenges that are neither too stressful to overwhelm or traumatize us nor too much the same to bore us or put us to sleep (Siegel, 1999). Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that “flow” is triggered when the challenge is neither too difficult nor too easy for our present level of ability—as long as we are engaging in the challenge voluntarily. So, when we choose to take on a challenge that is at our “growing edge” of ability in a chosen field, we are developing mastery. We are expertising. As a result of that process, our level of ability increases, our minds become more complex, our brains grow more connections, and we become more like the people we consider experts.

I propose that coaching practitioners may choose to take on the challenge of reading, understanding, and applying the lessons of various research studies as part of their own process of expertising or becoming a master of coaching.

But as both Siegel and Csikszentmihalyi point out, the challenge must be just at the growing edge of a person’s capacity for it to have the expertising effect. The guide below discusses some of the norms and conventions of writing about research as a means of providing a bridge for those coaches who are unfamiliar with them. Hopefully, this will help to make reading research a useful challenge rather than an unintelligible or overwhelming task.

Finding and Reading Research Papers

Once a coach has set her or his purpose in meeting the challenge of research (such as mastery), a more specific goal such as answering a question about a particular type of coaching or client may present itself. The problem then becomes where to find relevant research to read.

The Internet has made information much more available to scholars compared with even a decade ago. Yet it is often difficult to judge the quality or even veracity of information published online. Peer-reviewed or refereed journals remain the standard of quality for reporting research. That is, a researcher submits an article to a journal editor who asks other scholars (referees) to read it without knowing who wrote it. The referees recommend whether or not the article is worthy of publication. Peer-reviewed journals only publish research articles that have gone through this process, making it more likely that the article meets a high standard of quality.

The field of coaching studies is only beginning the process of developing peer-reviewed journals, so coaching-related articles are published in journals representing many behavioral and social science perspectives: psychology in all its variations including social, cognitive, and industrial/organizational; business, management, and leadership; education, especially adult education and learning theory; psychotherapy and counseling; sociology, anthropology, and planning; assessment and measurement; and many more.

Coaches must search widely in order to discover relevant research. The problem for readers who do not have an academic affiliation is that, while articles in these journals can be searched online, they tend to be available only by subscription to a particular database such as EBSCO or PsychInfo. However, most university and many public reference libraries will allow external scholars to use these services. A local reference librarian should be helpful in this search.

Once you have a research article, thesis, or dissertation in hand or on screen, you will notice that it likely follows a set outline. If you are new to reading articles like this, I invite you to look at the ones in this publication. You will see that most follow this format, even though they may not label the sections in exactly the same way. You may also notice that the papers that do not follow this outline (such as this paper) are not research papers at all, but essays that present ideas about research or theoretical articles that attempt to synthesize many specific research studies.

The sections of most research articles are: abstract; introduction; literature review; methodology; results; and discussion.

Abstract

The abstract is a summary of the most important points from each of the sections below. It can serve the purpose of helping the coach decide whether the article matches his or her general purpose (such as mastery) and specific goal (such as answering a question about a particular client or client group).

Introduction

In the introduction, the author(s) state what prompted their interest in the research topic, why it is important, and what it is specifically that they hope to accomplish. Often, this is stated as one or several hypotheses, or expectations set up ahead of time about what the results will ultimately be.

You may read about “null hypotheses.” These are made necessary due to a quirk of logic: a particular hypothesis cannot be proven, only disproven. For example, it is difficult to prove that reading research in a certain way will make you a more masterful coach, even if you read research and become more masterful. There may be other reasons for your becoming masterful or there may be errors in how we gathered or analyzed the data about your reading and your mastery. However, if you read and become masterful, that disproves the hypothesis that reading

prevents you from becoming masterful. So, if I restate the hypothesis in a null form, I can disprove or reject it: “reading research is not correlated with becoming a more masterful coach.” If I can devise a measure of reading research and a measure of mastery and then my results show the two measures are correlated, I can reject the null hypothesis. Stating hypotheses in a null form indicates what you should look for in the Results section.

Look in the Introduction for a description of the type of research that the authors undertook, such as

- quantitative (categorizing and statistical analysis) or qualitative (observing and defining themes and their relationships) or both
- comparing groups or cases at a single point in time
- longitudinal or followup (results over time or comparing two points in time)
- evaluation (measuring performance or results against preset criteria or standards)

In the introduction, the author(s) also warn you about shortcomings in the research design and about ways in which you might misinterpret or over-interpret their findings.

Literature Review

Theories and previous research on this or related topics are acknowledged and summarized in the literature review. Articles and books are cited according to a consistent style so that you and other readers can go to the original source to which the author has referred. Primary sources, or the publications in which the research is originally reported, is considered more scholarly than books, or secondary sources, which summarize and generalize from various primary sources.

Generally, this material is organized both chronologically and in a sort of funnel-shaped compelling argument from general definitions and overviews in the past, through more recent studies that test similar hypotheses but reveal gaps in understanding, to a specific conclusion that the very research proposed in this paper is the most logical next step.

In shorter journal articles, the literature review is included in the Introduction. In theses and dissertations, it will be a separate chapter and will include a large number of references. The literature review sets this study in the context of the larger scientific research conversation.

Methodology

In the methodology section the researchers spell out the specific steps they took to gather and analyze the data they are examining. The assumption is that any other researcher could take this description and replicate the data-gathering and analysis reliably. So if another researcher does this same study on a different group of people, differences in results are because of differences in the people studied, not in how the study is conducted. This standard of replicability is difficult to achieve in a relatively short journal article. Much more detail is included in dissertations and longer research monographs.

Results

The results section is where the authors report on the bare bones of their analysis. Often this involves statistics, so it is in this section that you may find tables and numbers. In a qualitative study, you can expect to read actual statements from participants that illustrate themes or categories so you can judge the validity for yourself.

The results are organized first to indicate how well the people studied, the sample, represent the larger group of people, the population, that is of interest to the researchers. Often, this includes demographic data such as age, sex, marital status, geographical location, economic status, and cultural, religious or racial background.

Second, results are produced to let the reader know whether it is reasonable to accept the one or several hypotheses that were presented in the Introduction. If the null hypotheses are rejected, the actual hypotheses are accepted. In many cases, statistical or qualitative analysis is done beyond that which was originally planned. This is called “post-hoc” analysis and, though interesting, often carries less weight.

Discussion

Here’s a tip: after reading the Introduction, go next to the Discussion section. After reading it, you can go back to the other sections depending on your interest and the desired application. In this section, the authors put meat on the statistical or analytic or qualitative bones presented in the Results section. They restate the results, often in more understandable language and talk about how strong their evidence is, what might account for a lack of results, other explanations for the results they found, and how future research might follow up on what they did. If there is an interest in application, they may discuss implications for practitioners.

Having a format like this means that each article is a contribution to a much larger ongoing conversation. Researchers all over the world eagerly await the next “utterance”, the one that is in response to previous questions or doubts raised, the one that indicates what would be the next most productive inquiry.

Coaches know how to carry on conversations. We know how to ask questions and pay attention to responses. We know how to allow answers to emerge from the conversation rather than imposing a pre-set agenda. For this reason, I believe coaches can use research not only to improve their own individual mastery of coaching, but also to accelerate the forward movement of the whole field of coaching studies.

Research and the Field of Coaching Studies³

From the perspective of coaching as a whole, there is another answer to the question “What do we want from our engagement with research?” Research has the potential to raise the field of Coaching Studies to a new level of competence and influence. There are many questions of general scientific interest that could be informed by the particular perspective of coaching, in addition to coach-specific topics.

The performances that we identify with mastery, although often publicly associated with one person, in fact are embedded in systems that support and encourage creativity and the sharing of ideas (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993). Such systems are described by Wheatley (1998) as having the capacity to engage with chaos yet emerge even stronger (see also Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). If we look at the field of coaching studies as such a system, it could be said that research itself is the expertising process writ large. If, as Grant (2004) suggests, the development of theory and research is important for the emerging profession of coaching, practicing coaches and researchers can further that process by allowing research to challenge every aspect of the coaching enterprise.

Wheatley (1998) describes two qualities of systems that can utilize challenges to raise their performance: shared goals and good communication. Coaches in general are faced with the challenge of agreeing on how and whether to incorporate both the production and the consumption of research into the emerging field of coaching studies. In addition to specific topics and issues, I propose that we also consider the question “What do we want from our engagement with research?” at the most general level.

At the same time as we consider general and specific goals, we also face the challenge of opening up channels of communication that involve as many practicing coaches as possible in reading and applying research as well as in producing it. Peer-reviewed journals for the field of coaching studies is a natural next step.

As practicing coaches engage with research in an expertising process and contribute to the ongoing conversation that furthers coaching mastery, the field of coaching studies will emerge both to establish its professional status and to further the understanding of humankind.

Endnotes

1. This paper was originally published in I. F. Stein, F. Campone, and L. J. Page (Eds.) (2005). *Proceedings of the second ICF coaching research symposium*. Washington, DC: International Coach Federation. It is reprinted here with permission of the author and the International Coach Federation.
2. This model has much in common with Schön’s “reflective practitioner” approach (Schön, 1987). However, the “expertising” model focuses on the dynamic nature of the process. See also the discussion of “scientist-practitioner” in Stober’s paper (Stober, 2005).
3. Irene Stein, co-editor of the first volume of this series (Stein, 2004) suggested this term to encompass the developing domain of knowledge of coaching.

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