

Story Matters: An Inquiry into the Role of Narrative in Coaching

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Abstract

This study explores how coaches understand the concept of narrative and work with it in their practice. Six coaches were interviewed using a method of narrative inquiry. The study found three broad approaches among their responses: story as the task of coaching; story as the content of coaching; and story in the context of coaching. The narrative perspective raises clients' awareness of the stories that shape their perception of reality and helps them achieve a more nuanced understanding of their situation. This provides a stronger foundation for action and decision-making but it may also be an end in itself.

Key Words: narrative, stories, coaching, consciousness, mind

Introduction

At some level, all coaching is a narrative process – focussed on a story of change with the client as the protagonist. The relevance of narrative is implicitly recognised in many of the canonical texts about coaching (J. Rogers, 2004; Whitmore, 2002; Whitworth, Kimsey-House & Sandahl, 1998), but there is not much explicit reference to narrative in the coaching literature. The study aims to address this gap by exploring the research question: how do coaches understand the concept of narrative and work with it in their practice. To this end, I interviewed a small number of narrative-aware coaches employing the method of narrative inquiry to discover in what ways their narrative-awareness informed their coaching.

Literature

A broad literature on the use of narrative in the helping professions was explored, including therapy and organisational development as well as coaching. For the broader context, I reviewed literature on the role of narrative in shaping our sense of self. I make no particular distinction between the nouns “story” and “narrative”, following the dictionary definition of both as an account of events (Chambers, 2011).

The assumption that a narrative perspective may be relevant to coaching is supported by the argument that humans are, at some level, narrative beings. Literature on narrative agrees that stories are integral to how humans understand the world (Bolton, 2005; Booker, 2005; Drake, 2007; McAdams, 1997). This narrative means of understanding is both an internal, psychological process and an external, socio-cultural one.

Internally, our conscious sense of self can be viewed as a continuous act of narration by the mind, as it tries to create meaning out of experience. While most of the mind’s work happens unconsciously, the conscious mind creates a strong drive for coherence and intent in what we think and do, a coherence which may be more apparent than real. This conscious sense of self may be viewed as the mind’s narrative centre of gravity (Dennett, 1993) or simply its narrator (Haidt, 2006).

Externally, stories are the currency of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The stories we hear and tell are central to how we make our sense of self socially and how we make social institutions: family, workplace, culture, society.

However, the analytical distinction between the internal and external can be overstated since the self is both a social and psychological process (Pountain, 2010). An individual's sense of self is created internally in the mind but strongly influenced by that person's interaction with the social environment. Meanwhile, the social environment itself is influenced by each individual's sense of self – since the individual, through his or her social relationships, is instrumental in creating the social environment. There is a temporal aspect to this: the self and culture are not fixed entities but enacted over time. Narrative too is temporal: a story arranges events in time, and in doing so makes sense of complex data. So it could be said that the socio-psychological process by which we construct our selves and our reality has a narrative quality in that it is enacting a story of our selves and our culture in time.

In the past, grand narratives, or hegemonic stories, provided ready-made means to make sense of things and therefore stories are wrapped up with power (Foucault, 1965). Grand narratives define people's place in the world and tend to reinforce relationships of authority within cultures. As grand narratives have been increasingly deconstructed, individuals have correspondingly acquired space, even responsibility, to make their own narratives which explain their place in the world (Campbell, 1949; Csikszentmihalyi, 1994; C. Rogers, 1964). The diminishing of grand narratives is not a trivial matter. It represents the casting aside of a means established over millennia to answer a deep-rooted human need for meaning. The challenge facing an individual to answer this need by means of bespoke narratives is immense. It is perhaps not surprising then that helpers, including coaches, have emerged even as the influence of more traditional wise elders has receded.

This might help explain why narrative techniques are evident in coaching, even where no explicit narrative methodology is referenced. Working with stories is evident in approaches to taking stock of a client's situation at the start of coaching. J. Rogers (2004) speaks of eliciting autobiographies through devices such as life history interviews, charting lifeline graphs or the Johari window (Luft, 1970). Whitworth et al. (1998) similarly advocate „discovery“ techniques, such as the wheel of life, to help clients tell the story of how their life is presently shaped and needs to change. Flaherty (2005) sees the moments when events contradict our personal story as openings for coaching.

Story-based techniques are advocated in values elicitation (Whitworth et al., 1998) by encouraging clients to remember moments in their lives when they were in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Creative imagination of alternative stories is evident in the NLP practice of identifying limiting beliefs and constructing more empowering ones (O'Connor & Lages, 2004) and in the GROW model's „options“ stage (Whitmore, 2002). Story is also central to various practices for envisioning preferred outcomes. Whitworth et al. (1998) and Downey (2001) offer exercises for visualising one's future self in rich descriptive detail. J. Rogers (2004) uses techniques such as writing one's own obituary or a postcard from the future.

There is an implicit recognition in such approaches that stories are an efficient way to generate rich material that can bring alive a coaching conversation. They introduce different perspectives, not just those of the protagonist but other characters too, and the contribution of metaphor and description can mobilise our imagination and creativity in the service of deepening understanding. Narrative awareness helps us get past the idea of there being „a“ story about a person.

People typically are subject to diverse narratives – stemming from their family and cultural background, societal values, their working identity, their aspirations, even their shadow side (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). Some of these can be mutually contradictory and confusing, even disempowering, for the client. People can end up playing involuntary roles that they have not chosen. Coaching that is sensitive to narrative can help clients to make sense of the web of stories of which they are a part and to exercise more discretion in how they are influenced by and, in turn, influence them.

We can look at stories as objects which have an existence of their own. This is the way most people think of stories. When people tell us something, we tend to see it as representative of some underlying truth. The story takes on a life of its own; it can be treated as a piece of content in its own right. This approach is evident in the study of stories in organisations (Gabriel, 2000) and much of the literature that deals with narrative in coaching (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005; Law, 2007; Law & Stelter, 2010; Peterson & Stebleton, 2007; Reissner, 2008)

Looking at it a different way, we can recognise that a story is never the same twice. How it is manifest depends on the context (Boje, 1998) – in particular, the relationship between narrator and listener, which is always unique. Even where a story is retold between two individuals, the perceptions both bring the second time are different. We are changed by participating in narration, constantly integrating new material into our mental constructs.

This has important implications for coaching. The conversation between coach and client is itself an act of storytelling to which the coach is a material party (Drake, 2007). So there is an onus on the coach to be sensitive to how this dynamic plays out for the client. Drake (2008) sees a need for the narrative-aware coach to pay attention to three things: creating a safe space (the context) in which the client can narrate his or her story and be present to it; advocating for the full story (the content) to emerge; helping the coachee to reframe the narrative material to gain a new perspective, new sense of self or new options for action. At this third level, Drake is identifying the process of storytelling to be as material as the content and context. He emphasises the centrality of “deep and generative listening” on the part of the coach (Drake, 2010): listening at multiple levels to the narrative content and the way that it is told, while being mindful of the coach’s own impact on the formation of the story. The aim is to bring to consciousness coachees’ „employment strategies“ which are largely unconscious and somatic, and helping coachees notice the difference between the stories they are telling and those they are living.

Methodology

The references above merely scratch the surface of an abundant literature on narrative. But within the literature on coaching, narrative is not a prominent theme. So the research question is framed as a way to generate data about how coaches who work with stories see the relevance of narrative to their practice and I interviewed six coaches who work with stories as part of the coaching model (see Appendix 1).

All the coaches were recruited through internet forums. I issued a research invitation on my website (Vogel, 2010) and distributed it via online networks such as Twitter.com and LinkedIn.com, a network for business professionals. Three participants were found from LinkedIn and three from Worldwide Story Work (<http://worldwidestorywork.ning.com>), an online network for story practitioners. The three from LinkedIn – Jackie Bayer, Cliff Kimber and Judy Rosemarin – may be considered executive coaches first who draw on narrative techniques. The three from Worldwide Story Work – Lisa Bloom, Karen Dietz and Limor Shiponi – place more emphasis on being story practitioners who coach.

The sample was self-selecting in that the participants were included if they considered their orientation to narrative in their coaching practice to be relevant to my research question. They shared some attitudes whose representation in the study may have flowed from this method of selection. Based on their interview answers, it was evident that all shared an understanding of humans’ tendency to tell stories as somehow natural – either in the sense that through stories we construe our reality, or in the more restricted sense that storytelling is a natural and engaging way to communicate. Most were unscriptive about what constitutes a story: broadly, a description of a series of events that conveys meaning. Most saw stories as containing some emotional content.

In seeking informed consent, I offered all the participants the opportunity to go „on the record“ rather than be anonymous. Influenced by Mishler (1986), I took the view that this would facilitate a

more equal and collaborative relationship between researcher and participant. It would provide greater responsibility and respect to the participants than would have been the case if their views had been taken out of context by being anonymised. And it would make me more accountable in how I presented their evidence. All accepted the invitation to go on the record and be named.

Certain methodological choices flowed from the way I conceptualised the place of narrative in social life. Given my emphasis on the collaborative nature of how we construct narratives, I wanted to use a form of inquiry which took account of my own involvement as a researcher in the meaning of the research rather than attempting to bracket it out. Figure 1 below shows the process followed.

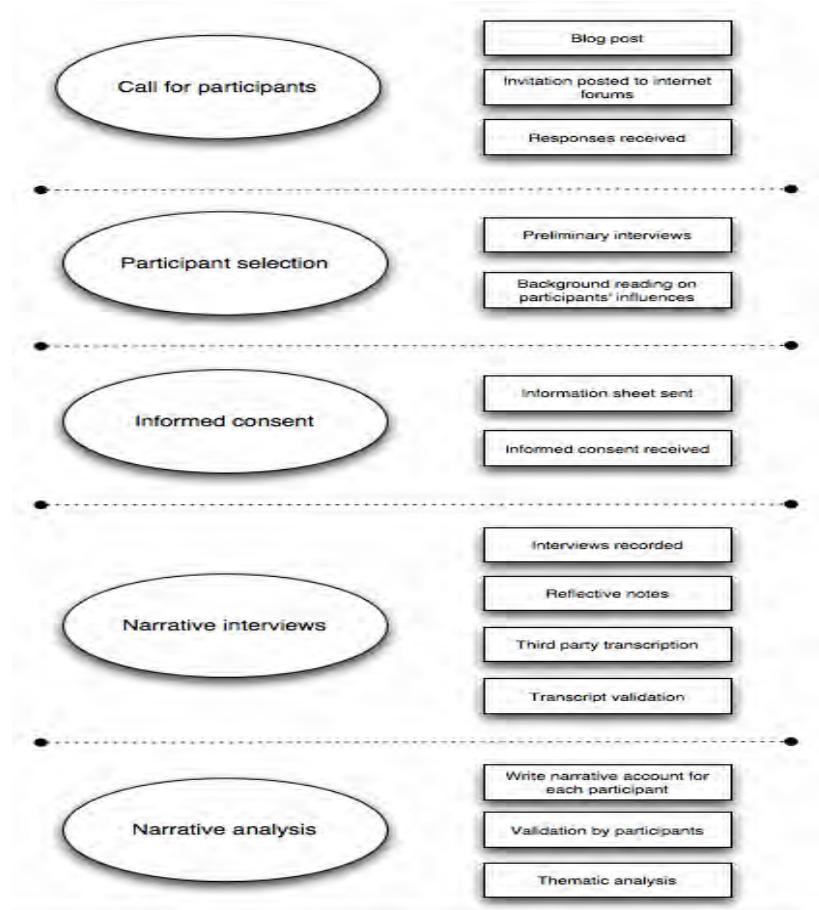


Figure 1 - The Field Research Process

I designed a methodology of narrative inquiry, drawing largely on Riessman (1993; 2008) and Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou (2008). My aspiration was to focus on the participants' subjective meaning-making, while recognising that I (as the researcher) would influence the emerging data by virtue of the biases, mental constructs and predispositions that I was bringing to the study and would exercise through the processes of interviewing, data analysis and so forth.

Each participant was interviewed for about 90 minutes. The interview model was semi-structured – framed around five core questions, with supplementary questions springing off from these where appropriate. The five core research questions were:

- What kind of coaching do you do?
- What is your interest in narrative and story?
- How do you use narrative and story in your coaching practice?
- What does this open up for your clients?
- How is your thinking on narrative and story developing?

Since my research objective was to investigate whether and how narrative coaching was being practised, the questions were drafted as high-level explorations of how the coaches identified themselves as coaches and the ways in which they used narrative techniques. I wanted to ascertain: that the interviewees were indeed practising coaching; what they understood by narrative; and why they considered it relevant to draw on narrative in their coaching practice.

The questions were open-ended and few in number, in keeping with the considerations of narrative inquiry. The researcher aims for an interview that is dignified and respectful of the participant: not seeking to control the dialogue to meet the researcher's agenda but to elicit stories in an open-ended way (Mishler, 1986). Again, this approach conforms to the view that the data that emerges is recognised as a collaboration between researcher and participants.

I drew a boundary round this collaboration at the transition from data generation to data analysis. This was a logistical consideration as much as anything, given limited time to complete the study. In theory and without the time constraint, it would have been possible to invite the participants to collaborate in the interpretation. Having drawn this boundary around collaboration, it felt necessary to mark the transition clearly. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I wrote a narrative account of each participant's understanding of the relevance of narrative to coaching and validated the accounts with the participants. Some suggested minor amendments which I accepted. After this, I moved to analysing the data thematically without further consultation with the participants. The resulting conclusions therefore represent my independent discussion of the data and may not necessarily represent the views of the participants.

Findings

Through the thematic analysis, I identified three broad ways in which the participants understand narrative and use it in their coaching practice. The identifications were based on the participants' philosophical grounding, their described purpose in coaching and the ways in which they draw on narrative awareness. The three approaches of narrative-aware coaching that I identified are:

- Story as the task of coaching
- Story as the content of coaching
- Story in the context of coaching

These are distinguished by the extent to which the coaches focus on developing the client's storytelling capability versus the extent to which they focus on using narrative techniques as a form of coaching inquiry, not necessarily to develop a storytelling purpose. These are my categories rather than the participants' and they are not mutually exclusive. So it is possible for a coach to be using one, two or all three of the narrative approaches that I describe. And most of the participants are combining more than one approach.

Story as the task of coaching

The first approach is applied when the explicit purpose of coaching is to develop the client's storytelling ability, usually in relation to some presentational challenge. Examples cited by the participants include: politicians honing their interviewing skills; business leaders who need to inspire

followers; entrepreneurs who want to attract finance or customers; clients going through career change. This is close to training, except it is not so much about skills transfer and more about helping clients uncover an authentic story about themselves which will serve their purposes – authenticity being seen as a more effective way of engaging people:

My work is turning these people who have to influence others into compelling storytellers. In other words, to get them out of talking head mode and have them show up as authentic leaders. (KD)

So the coach works with the client to fashion a story that can be told in practical situations – but also to develop the presence to listen while telling, so that the storyteller can be responsive to the needs of the specific audience being addressed.

The „story as task“ approach resonates with the idea of authentic leadership (Goffee and Jones, 2006). Clients learn to find stories to tell from within their own experience and to develop their self-knowledge and intuition. They make an impact by allowing themselves to be more vulnerable; „not arrogant, not a jerk“ (KD). There is also something intrinsic to storytelling as a form that they begin to utilise to put listeners at their ease. It takes the audience back to a more childlike way of listening; less sceptical, more accepting. This may be the quality that writers in organisations detect in finding that stories in business contexts are easier to buy into than literal facts, as they invite acceptance rather than critique (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Birchard, 2002). Although task-focussed, this model can involve clients in deep re-interpretation of their biography as they look for stories within their own experience and possibly validate experiences that they have previously discounted.

Story as the content of coaching

The second approach may address a broad range of coaching objectives but frames the client’s objectives in narrative terms. It focuses on the client’s coaching issues as a story and works on developing a narrative that will allow the client to construe reality in the most empowering way.

Two of the participants used a model based on the hero’s journey, the archetypal narrative identified by Joseph Campbell (1949) which, he argued, is present in most great myths. This frames development as a quest on which clients will be tested before fulfilling their destiny and emerging changed by the process. There is an understanding in this model that the client’s work is the conscious development of a new self-story. If how we construe reality is through stories, the thinking goes, then we can change reality by telling ourselves different stories:

Our perspective and our outlook and the stories we tell are pretty much the reality that exists for us... I see that as very, very empowering because that means we can create any reality we want. (LB)

In this sense, the model is akin to identifying limiting beliefs and replacing them with more enabling ones.

There is also great emphasis on imaginative work – rich description, playing with scenarios, constructing alternate realities in the coaching conversation in which strategies for dealing with an issue can be played out experimentally:

Being in such a detailed environment where it feels real, if you manage to create this different behaviour in a real world why won’t you be able to do it in another real world, which is your real life. (LS)

The participants feel that this kind of work mobilises the client’s inner resources, the wisdom that is most of the time beyond consciousness. It facilitates the client’s creativity to achieve new insights that the client can then draw on in a conscious way to effect change.

Story in the context of coaching

The third approach may also address a broad range of coaching issues. But it is less focussed on the client's story than on the client's narrative meaning-making, how the client makes sense of the world through constructing stories. This orientation pays attention to how a narrative emerges in the moment between coach and client.

There is no particular emphasis on the client fashioning a new story, still less the coach doing so. Instead of the conscious pursuit of a predefined change, it focuses on fostering the client's self-awareness. This does not mean that it eschews the fulfilment of objectives. Rather, the client's development is a function of the process rather than the object of it. So, the approach involves the coach listening for narrative elements and drawing attention to how clients' habitual worldviews shape the possibilities and constraints in their lives. This might involve shifting perspective by looking at stories from the viewpoints of different characters. The aim is to help clients notice the diverse and possibly conflicting narratives in their biography and to question the truth of narratives in which they may be stuck.

The key characteristic is that the coach brings sensitivity to how the story that is told is itself influenced by the coaching. If a coach brings narrative awareness, there is a great temptation to imbue a familiar narrative trajectory to a client's story rather than eliciting it from the client. So it is important to step back and avoid getting caught in the details:

I think it's the job of a coach to stand back and observe the story but not get caught up in the story, get caught up in the details... So, you know, to not identify someone in the story as the protagonist, for instance, or to not say, „Ah, there's the challenge to overcome.“ You know, but to stay open enough to letting the story evolve – so that you're learning as the coachee is learning about the story. (JB)

It is thus a balancing act for coaches: holding awareness of their role as a collaborator in the client's narration while having the self-discipline to stand aside from the story and not be the director of the plot.

Discussion

What the three models share is an emphasis on strengthening the client's sense of authenticity through self-knowledge and self-authorship. I turn to neuroscience to explain this. My argument is that narrative coaching taps into the diverse and contradictory nature of the self in a way which goes with the grain of how the mind construes the self. It does this by drawing into clients' narrative centre of gravity aspects of their life experience which may not have been integrated into their habitual story of the self.

While the mind creates an impression of a consistent, conscious self that claims agency over what we do, neuroscience leads us to understand consciousness as more like a perceptual overlay to a complex network of neurological and biochemical processes of which we are largely unconscious and which are really in the driving seat (Blackmore, 2003).

Narrative coaching operates at both levels: at the level of consciousness, by trying to influence the narrative consistency that is spun by the conscious mind; and at the level of the unconscious processes, by stimulating the mind to activate a broader range than it habitually does of what Claxton (1994) calls the mini-theories of the self. These are the habits, routines and responses that come into play in different aspects of our lives.

My view is that the „story in context“ orientation is the one that best fits what we know about how the mind works. By stimulating the mind's creativity, it encourages lateral and possibly innovative connections between the mini-theories of the self, allowing the unconscious mind to do its work and synthesise new possibilities:

You as a coach aren't providing them with a different story... You're asking them to access what's in their own experience that's outside of the framework of story, of their typical story. (JB)

The outcome of coaching here relies less on an act of will by the coachee than on a disruption to the coachee's normal pattern of integrating experience; a disruption which stimulates the mind – the embodied mind, with its overwhelmingly unconscious processes – to synthesise a new narrative; or, more precisely, to revise its narrative centre of gravity.

The „story as content“ model strikes me as more contentious in the assumptions it makes about agency. To expect a client to work with a coach to fashion a story of being that is more empowering than the habits of a lifetime, and then resolve to enact it, draws on unreasonable expectations about the possibilities of conscious will (Blackmore, 2003). Insofar as the approach works, I would argue it does so by stimulating the unconscious association of goal-pursuit with positive affect (Aarts, 2007) – but, in this respect, it operates in much the same way as the „story in context“ approach. „Story as task“ strikes me as a more plausible intervention, focussed as it is on a much less ambitious and contained presentational challenge which is relatively easily put into practice.

A key benefit of a narrative approach for coaching is that it seems to play a valuable role in making it feel safe for the client to be creative. It enables the client to step out of habitual routines of thought, and make connections between different aspects of one's self that don't normally come to the surface. Lisa Bloom gave the example of her work with Palestinians and Israelis, whom she encourages to share stories in groups – an experience which elicits empathy with each other as humans, an emotion that arises with more difficulty in the routine separation of the Palestinian and Israeli communities in their daily lives.

At a very basic level, the safety to explore arises because stories take us back to when we felt safe as children. We relax into a more open, less judgmental way of being. But by stimulating the imagination – sometimes the explicitly make-believe, but more often just by helping clients search deep inside themselves for answers – narrative coaching can make it possible for the client to come up with revealing ideas, go to outlandish places, and open lines of enquiry that are normally closed off. This gives meaning to the Rogerian idea of the client's resourcefulness (C. Rogers, 1961). Clients really do have the answers within themselves but do not routinely make connections between different aspects (or mini-theories) of the self. By bringing, with the help of narrative exploration, more of their whole person to bear on coaching issues, they begin to evolve ways of being which feel more congruent.

A cognitive developmental perspective sheds more light on how narrative coaching engages with the client's resourcefulness. If, over a lifetime, an individual goes through various stages of cognitive development – as, at each stage, he/she reaches a different balance between the self and the external world (Kegan, 1983) – then narrative plays out this dynamic at a micro-level. A story is never the same twice, as the circumstances of its telling are always unique. The second time we hear a story we bring learning from the first time and hear it differently. Applied in a coaching framework, we bring this learning to bear on narratives about ourselves and our disposition to the narratives of which we are a part in the wider world. Thereby we put into flux the balance that we hold between subject and object and open the possibility of developing a more complex awareness, a more mature sense of ourselves in the world.

Because the narrative perspective views individuals as resourceful, and influential on the stories of which they are a part, a significant aspect of participants' evidence is their optimistic view of systems. They do not, on the whole, subscribe to a mechanistic view of systems as rigid and homeostatic. Their view is more akin to chaos theory, a conception of organisational life similar to that of Wheatley (2006). The participants do not fail to recognise the resistance to change that institutions display. But they place more focus on the specificity of an individual's experience within

a social setting. If reality is constructed socially, then one individual can have an impact on the system by showing up differently. This entails clients not just changing their own story, but enrolling others in it too. Story, in this sense, is a gambit: if you disrupt the script, others are forced to consider whether or not to play along. And in any organisation, there are subversive and sub-cultural narratives as well as the dominant ones. These create space for clients to make choices and to develop independently even within an over-arching culture.

I have outlined a view of narrative coaching as being about promoting awareness of clients' own meaning-making within a social context and facilitating lateral connections between different aspects of the self. I have expressed scepticism about encouraging the application of agency in pursuit of a new self-story. This leads to a view of coaching as an emergent process that produces insight for the client. But what is the client supposed to do with this insight? Or how does the client achieve the desired change? To some extent, that is determined by the model – story as task, as content or in context. But it is also about letting go of a pre-conceived direction of travel. If coaching is about change, then narrative coaching holds out a more subtle way of being for the client. It is not necessarily concerned with outcome-oriented action. Clients become more knowing of who they are, and more authentic in their choices. In some respects, they may be less inclined to change as they become more comfortable with contradictions and the complexity of their cultural make-up. In this sense, narrative coaching resembles the existential stance which begins with the acceptance of uncertainty (Spinelli, 2010; Spinelli & Horner, 2007).

Conclusions

The study has generated new data on how narrative-aware coaches work with stories in coaching and why. It thereby complements the implicit advocacy of narrative techniques in the broader literature on coaching. While some coaches would put great emphasis on challenging the client to create alignment around a new narrative, my own view is that the greater contribution of the narrative perspective comes through raising clients' awareness of the stories that shape their perception of reality and helping them come to terms with a more complex and nuanced understanding of their situation. This provides a stronger foundation for action and decision-making, if that is what the client desires. But it may also be an end in itself.

In conclusion, I turn to some of the challenges and opportunities of working with stories in coaching. A narrative-aware approach to coaching can be helpful because it is consistent with how we think and construe reality. While this holds as a working assumption, it is nonetheless necessary to hold in mind that narrative coaching may not be for everyone. Strawson (2004) for one, based on his own introspection, strongly disputes the idea that we are all narrative beings. As with all coaching, careful contracting is necessary to ensure that the client is well matched to the methodology. As argued above, I view narrative coaching as most relevant to broader, developmental scenarios than narrowly-focussed performance issues (other than those where the performance issue concerns the narration of a story for a presentational task). But the distinction can be overstated, since narrative coaching can be used to facilitate a wide range of outcomes (as the implicit advocacy of narrative techniques in the coaching literature would suggest). My contention is that the narrative approach ignites a developmental trajectory from which aspirations and outcomes emerge. Clients could as easily become more accepting of their current reality than seeking to transform it in line with a goal negotiated up front. But even this is a form of change. The key outcome that narrative coaching offers is that clients become more present to themselves in their social context and able to act with more impact within that context and to experience more congruence.

Narrative mobilises a client's creativity and imagination. This is an immensely valuable means of making real coaching's belief in the client's resourcefulness. But some people are suspicious of stories: seeing them as make-believe and irrelevant to real life or, worse, malevolent (evoking spin, dissimulation or deception). These are legitimate concerns, which are sometimes ignored by narrative

practitioners who see stories as some kind of unalloyed good (Gabriel, 2004). Coaches drawing on the narrative perspective need to find a way to communicate the benefits of its application without overselling it. These benefits centre on its ability to push forward thinking and shift dispositions to the situation. An evidence-based use of narrative in coaching would not dwell on the notion of a client spinning a new reality through storytelling.

Narrative is most powerful when allied with a non-directive approach. The immersive and engaging nature of stories creates risks for a coach unwarily using narrative techniques. A coach can become engrossed in a client's story for its own sake. The closer the coach's familiarity with narrative forms, the higher the risk. Practitioners guard against this, as we have seen, by drawing on disciplines to stand aside and check that they are in the service of the client's narrative, not arranging it. Because stories easily elicit emotional content, they can lead a coach into boundary issues, a risk that is present in all forms of coaching. A coach using narrative techniques needs to be sensitive to when the client may need more appropriate support.

The participants in the study mostly had prior experience in creative occupations. This may suggest that certain kinds of people are predisposed to work with narrative. But it takes no prior experience of having been a creative type to draw on narrative techniques. There is a challenge here for coach trainers and coaching supervisors to become more acquainted with the possibilities of narrative work so as to be able to introduce it to and contextualise it for coaches. One opportunity for further research is to explore the utility of narrative techniques to coaches who are not familiar with them, possibly through action research. Trainers and supervisors might also consider exploring the uses of narrative techniques to facilitate the client's creativity and the necessity to guide coaches on the specific challenges of working with narrative.

A narrative approach, with its emphasis on cultural influences, strengthens the idea of coaching as a multi-disciplinary practice and can be a corrective to approaches that are excessively rooted in psychology. There's an opportunity for coach training and supervision, in drawing on narrative methodologies, to open a dialogue about the relevance of sociological, political and economic discourses. Narrative is characterised by the richness with which it synthesises diverse perspectives – from the personal and emotional to the socio-economic and rational. It blends complex data into easily comprehensible-meaning. While coaches draw on narrative for a variety of purposes, my argument is that its biggest contribution to coaching is improving the quality and depth of the client's self-awareness and that this, in itself, creates a dynamic of self-development. As opposed to contracting around a goal and negotiating progress towards it, there is no clear destination in this approach. For me, it is founded more on the conviction that, if clients do the work of narrative exploration, they will bring more wisdom to their decision-making and their action in the world – and, ultimately, live with a sense of ease about who they are.

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Martin Vogel is a coach and consultant at Valoro VGW (<http://valoro.co.uk>) which specialises in helping organisations create social value. This article is based on research for his MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice at Oxford Brookes University.

Appendix 1 - Participant Coaches

	<p>Jackie Bayer, executive coach Location: Washington State Age: 63 Background: The director of organisational development for a large professional services firm. Formally a psychologist and therapist, she developed a story orientation to her practice before discovering the narrative therapy movement of Michael White (White & Epston, 1990). Trained as a coach with the Hudson Institute 25 years ago.</p>
	<p>Lisa Bloom, storyteller and life and business coach Location: Israel Age: 42 Background: She trains coaches to use storytelling in their practice, and works with organisations and entrepreneurs on applications of story techniques in business. A trained storyteller, she worked as an organisational development specialist before training as a coach with the International Coach Academy and going self-employed.</p>
	<p>Karen Dietz, story coach Location: California Age: 56 Background: Specialises in turning leaders and organisations into compelling storytellers. She began her career as an academic folklorist in Philadelphia. Learned the craft of oral storytelling from Ron Evans, a Chippewa-Cree from Saskatchewan. Worked as an organisational development consultant before 'coming out' as a story specialist in 2000.</p>
	<p>Cliff Kimber, coach and facilitator. Location: England Age: 49 Background: A coach for 10 years, using a model of the hero's journey. Influences include Campbell (1949) and Kelly (1991). He trained with the School of Coaching and with Performance Consultants. Cliff grew up in the East End of London, worked in sales and publishing before moving into coaching. He is also a scriptwriter.</p>
	<p>Judy Rosemarin, executive coach Location: New York Age: 68 Background: She's a leadership and transition coach to senior executives and trains and supervises other coaches. A photojournalist by background, she entered coaching 27 years ago via career counselling and later gained two Masters degrees. After being introduced to therapeutic storytelling, she includes a strong focus on stories in her coaching. She is also involved in community theatre.</p>
	<p>Limor Shiponi, storyteller, musician and coach Location: Israel Age: 48 Background: She coaches young, male business executives or women in late middle age who are at a point of transition in their lives. Her coaching uses a model based on the hero's journey (Campbell, 1949) and is also influenced by popular science and by her musicianship. She trained with the International Coach Academy.</p>