

# Want to get the best out of your students? Let's coach!



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What if you took students on a journey of discovery where they became their own guides over time? What if, during your lectures, you could lead students to more self-regulation through focused interactions and feedback? What if, in addition to being a lecturer, you could also be a coach to your students?

Coaching can be a great way to guide students towards more self-regulation. By coaching students in a targeted way, you can ensure that they plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning, so they get better at processing and applying the subject matter, while also increasing their problem-solving skills.

But what exactly does coaching mean in an educational context? What advantages does it have, and how do you realise them in practice? In this Teaching Tip, we provide practical tools for everyone who wants to bring out the best in their students and in themselves through coaching.

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## What is coaching?

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Coaching is a hot topic in many different contexts, from the world of sports to business management, psychotherapy, and so on. The literature on this topic contains extensive discussions of coaching methods in these various contexts.

Below is a selection of quotes from this literature to illustrate what coaching can mean in an educational context.

*Coaching is unleashing someone's potential qualities in a **methodical** way (purposefully, consciously and systematically planned), so that this individual performs as well as possible when **realising goals** (Lakerveld, Tijmes & Ruijter, 2002).*

*At its core, the coaching approach consists of **facilitating** learning through **active listening** and **asking questions**, while offering appropriate **challenges** and **support** (Griffiths, 2005).*

*Rather than advising, coaching is about listening and asking the right questions to make students **think for themselves** and reflect on their situation (Ulenaers, 2013).*

*Coaching means **eliciting** and **supporting** learning (Clement, 2015).*

*In coaching-style teaching, you go on a journey together, within the boundaries set by the coach. In other words, you need to find the right **balance** between providing space for the student's **own development** and learning process on the one hand, and **offering, demonstrating and teaching** the subject matter on the other (Wyffels, 2014).*

In short, coaching means supporting your students in taking responsibility for their own learning (see also [ECHO Tip 87](#) and [ECHO Tip 98](#)), without letting go of the reins completely. The individual student, who has a unique set of capabilities, motivation and interests, is always the starting point. Your focus should be on achieving goals, without losing sight of the process.

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## Principles of good coaching

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As a lecturer, you try to create awareness among your students about their learning skills, so that they can use them effectively and continue to develop them. You do



this while teaching – for instance during activating assignments, while giving feedback, while supervising internships or Master dissertations, and so on.

So what are good coaching skills to use while teaching? Below we will discuss seven specific skills that contribute to good coaching, according to Clement (2015).

- **Explore** – Assess each student's situation. How are their learning skills? What are they already doing? What are their strengths? Where could they benefit from more support? What are their expectations and what motivates them? Map out their situations for yourself, so you can take them into account during your lectures.
- **Appreciate and empower** – If you want your students to be excited about your subject and eager to learn more, then try to create a positive learning climate with room for affirmation and appreciation (see also [ECHO Tip 97](#)). An appreciative environment increases students' willingness to engage and to open up to feedback. Highlight what they do well and praise good ideas, good intentions and commitment. Believe in their potential and look for elements you really appreciate in their behaviour, their approach, or their way of thinking.
- **Confront** – A positive climate doesn't mean that there can't be clear agreements and a critical attitude. Don't hesitate to confront students with critical feedback at regular intervals. After all, this feedback creates new learning opportunities for them (see also the [ECHO Tips on giving feedback](#)). Identify clearly what needs to be improved, in a way that doesn't discourage the students, but motivates them to take your feedback to heart and implement it. This can often be achieved by being mindful of the specific wording of the feedback and by supplementing it with suggestions for improvement that point students in the right direction.
- **Challenge** – It's important not only to support your students, but also to challenge them actively. Encourage them to take the initiative and to push their limits, for example by setting challenging goals together for the next lecture/assignment/feedback session/etc.

- **Inspire** – By asking specific questions, you can inspire students to think about alternative perspectives or possible new paths. For instance, you could ask them to come up with a way to solve a case discussed in class, an issue that they're facing with their dissertation/internship, etc. This way, you can help stimulate their creative thinking and problem-solving abilities.
- **Allow** – Students may experience certain emotions that interfere with their learning process. They may be disillusioned, disheartened or demotivated. Acknowledge and allow space for those feelings, showing you care by regularly asking them how they're doing. Be sure to demonstrate personal and sincere interest when doing so. You can also allow some room for self-reflection, for example before and/or after an assignment. Ask the students to reflect on their approach and on their feelings about the assignment. What did they find most difficult? What seemed daunting?
- **Relax** – A lecturer who remains relaxed, even when things are difficult, is helpful in the learning process. Students can find comfort in this, so they feel supported and can focus their full attention on the learning content. In other words, a relaxed learning environment is key for both the lecturer and the students.

These seven skills can be used in various contexts, from activating lectures to group assignments and the supervision of dissertations, so they're widely applicable in your profession. The strength of these skills depends on how well they're combined (Clement, 2015). To challenge, inspire and confront students, you need a forgiving climate of relaxation and appreciation. Exploration is the starting point for all this.

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### The coaching conversation

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As indicated in the previous section ('Principles of good coaching'), coaching skills are widely applicable in education, and can be just as useful when teaching large groups as when coaching individual students. The actual coaching conversation, however, focuses specifically on **supervising smaller numbers of students** (e.g. as they carry out group assignments) **or individual students** (e.g.



as they write their dissertations). However, certain elements inherent to these smaller-scale coaching conversations can also be useful when teaching larger groups.

During a coaching conversation with a student, you discuss their learning skills by means of **in-depth questions**. You give **development-oriented feedback**, which is focused on the student's growth. Together, you look for the causes of success and failure and explore **possibilities for improvement** (Slooter, 2018).

A coaching conversation is characterised by a specific **conversation structure**. A model that's still widely used today is Whitmore's GROW model (1992). GROW is an acronym for the four phases distinguished by Whitmore. These phases are dynamic, which means that they're not necessarily in sequential order. GROW covers all the areas that are important to address during a coaching conversation.

- **G is for Goal – Exploring the students' goals.**  
Always start a coaching conversation by asking what the student wants to achieve, both in the short term (e.g. by the end of the conversation or lecture) and in the long term (e.g. by the end of the programme component, or the entire programme). The goals stated by the student will determine the further course of the conversation, so take enough time to explore these. Goals can also be suggested by you as a coach, checking how the student feels about them. They can also be set together. It's important to help students formulate SMART goals: they should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound.

*Sample questions*

- *What do you want to achieve?*
- *What aspects would you like to change?*
- *Where do you hope this programme/journey will take you?*
- *How will you know that you've achieved that goal?*
- *etc.*

- **R is for Reality – Becoming aware of the current situation.** In this phase, you and the student map out the reality, the context, and see how it is affecting the student's goals. It's important to do this as descriptively as possible, without judging, and to determine possible levers for change.

*Sample questions*

- *How are things going now?*
- *What is being done? When? By whom? How often?*
- *What works and what doesn't?*
- *What's missing for you in the way things are going now?*
- *etc.*

- **O is for Options – Identifying possible options.**  
In this phase, you look for ways to realise the goals that have been set, given the reality/context. The focus is on 'doing', on 'action'. It's useful to stimulate 'thinking outside the box' in this phase, so that the student can arrive at new insights regarding possible options. As a coach, you can also suggest certain options, always checking with the student how feasible they seem.

*Sample questions*

- *Which option would you choose if there was nothing stopping you?*
- *What would be another way to handle this?*
- *What are some alternatives?*
- *What are the pros and cons of these options?*
- *What can you do about the cons of this option?*
- *etc.*

- **W is for Will/Way forward – Determining the action.** In this final phase of the coaching conversation, it's decision time. The next steps to be taken are determined. Have the student clearly formulate what is to be done, and agree that you'll start off the next conversation going over how it went.

### Sample questions

- What are you going to do?
- What do you think is the most interesting option to realise your goals?
- What specific steps are you going to take?
- What's the deadline for the first step?
- etc.

## Summary

In this Teaching Tip, we discussed how coaching can help lecturers bolster students' learning skills and self-regulation, both when teaching large groups and in one-to-one relationships. It's about promoting students' personal development, taking both the process and the product into account. Through coaching, you can guide your students in such a way that they retain ownership of the intended change.

The role of coach is just one of the roles you can take on in your teaching practice. Limiting yourself to only coaching is not a good idea, as this wouldn't be enough to fulfil your teaching responsibilities. The important thing is to use coaching skills when it makes sense for the student and for you. Coaching skills can then make a difference, helping to increase the students' learning efficiency.

Let's conclude with one last quote from Danny Wyffels (2014): "Coaching is getting the best out of your student by using the best of yourself as a teacher. It's a journey of discovery, orchestrated by the teacher."

## Want to know more?

### Literature

Clement, J. (2015). *Inspirerend coachen*. Tielt: Lannoo.

Griffiths, K. (2005). Personal Coaching: A Model for Effective Learning. *Journal of Learning Design*, 1(2), 55-65.

Lakerveld, A, Tijmes, I. & Ruijter, J. (2002). *Visies op supervisie*. Schiedam: Uitgeverij Boom/Nelissen.

Slooter, M. (2018). *De zes rollen van de leraar*. Huizen, The Netherlands: Pica.

Ulenaers, E. (2013). *Krachtig coachen*. Consulted on 5 January 2021 at <https://associatie.kuleuven.be/events/studie-studenten-begeleiding/presentaties/elsulenaers.pdf>

Whitmore, J. (1992). *Coaching for Performance*. London: Nicholas Brealey

Wyffels, D. (2014). *Hoe coach ik mijn klas?* Tielt: Lannoo.

### ECHO Teaching Tips

- [Online education: Students in Charge of Their Own Learning](#)
- [Positive vibration, yeah! A positive classroom climate](#)
- [Coachen van studenten \(ECHO Tip 7 - Dutch\)](#)
- [Versterken van zelfregulerend leren in het hoger onderwijs \(ECHO Tip 87 - Dutch\)](#)

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