

Anyone can coach? Focus on student well-being



September 2021 ECHO Tip

Centre of Expertise for Higher Education (University of Antwerp)

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Student coaching has become an integral part of higher education, with different social evolutions causing a sharp increase in demand for student coaching in recent years. Higher education was flexibilised with more individual study programmes, there was the abrupt switch to 100% distance learning ... and such changes always cause pressure and stress. Luckily, guidance is offered to students through different channels: they can consult study programme counsellors, study coaches and student psychologists. But as a lecturer or assistant, you too can have a significant impact by providing targeted support to students.

Students may come to you because they're struggling with the study content, experiencing great stress, or having second thoughts about their choice of study programme. While you don't have to engage in intensive or long-term coaching, it's important to at least be able to have a good conversation and, if needed, to refer the student to the right colleague for further follow-up.

In this month's Teaching Tip, we'll take a closer look at how to coach students while looking out for their well-being. What distinguishes coaching from therapy? What is the basic attitude of a coach? Which techniques are best used during coaching conversations? When should you refer the student to a colleague with specific expertise? We will be expanding on previously published tips on coaching and guiding students (February & March 2021) with a focus on student well-being.

What is coaching, and at what point does it become therapy?

The literature contains many definitions of coaching in various contexts. In this Teaching Tip, we define coaching as the act of 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).

Coaching means assisting people with a practical or organisational challenge (the task), while an emotional component (the person) may play a role – as long as it's a secondary one. **Coaching** is

therefore based on a **development question**, with the task and the person going hand in hand.

Within education or training, coaching can be a useful tool to facilitate student learning. The acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes (i.e. competences) can then be seen as the student's task or goal (see also: [February 2021 ECHO tip](#)). If, however, a student experiences too many barriers on an emotional level, this can hinder learning. Then it may be necessary to address psychological or emotional aspects.

But at what point exactly does coaching become therapy? **Psychotherapy** is appropriate when the person's needs take precedence. In other words, the student doesn't have a development question,



but rather a **clear request for help**, with emotions playing a major role. For example: a student who is depressed, a student with low self-esteem, with severe fear of failure, and so on. It goes without saying that these problems can impact students' lives and study results greatly, and require more intensive guidance. A referral to more specialised help (discussed below in the paragraph on 'Boundaries and referral') is then in the interest of both the lecturer and the student.

Basic attitude of the coach

As a coach, you should adopt an **inquisitive attitude** to help the student consider possible solutions. Although it may be tempting to solve the problem for them, you should always try to ensure that they gain new insights and explore different possibilities.

Start the conversation by exploring and identifying the problem, and then move towards an exploration of potential solutions. In other words, a coaching conversation should always be **solution-oriented**. Of course, there will not always be a ready-made solution at hand. And it certainly doesn't have to come from the coach alone – quite on the contrary.

As a coach, you should also be aware of your own **frame of reference**. This is the lens through which you look at the student, which is coloured by your own experiences, norms and values. Your way of coaching will also depend on that frame of reference. It will have an impact on your input during the conversation, the questions you ask, the ideas you put forward, the way you perceive the situation, and so on. Your own frame of reference may be very different from the student's, but by being aware of it, keeping an open mind and adopting an open attitude, you can still find a way to connect with the student (see point 4 of the following paragraph: 'Reflecting without judging').

How to conduct a coaching conversation

The basis of any conversation is listening, summarising and digging deeper (Donders, 2016). By using these skills, you can get the most out of a conversation, enable the student to really get to the core of an issue, and discuss the challenge it represents. Below are seven **verbal conversation techniques** that can help you with this.

1. Giving the other person space

It's important to let the student finish before you start talking. This way, you create space for the student to come forward with their story, to feel welcomed and acknowledged by you.

2. Using the power of silence

Silence doesn't always have to be uncomfortable. It's important to slow down the conversation regularly. This gives you both the opportunity to let things sink in. Your conversation partner will tend to break the silence with useful information. In other words, silence can provoke meaningful reactions.

3. Asking summarising questions

Summarising what has been said so far ensures that you always come back to the essence of what the other person is trying to say. When you present your summary as a question, you give your conversation partner the chance to confirm or correct it, so that you're both on the same page. Be sure to summarise regularly during, and especially at the end of the conversation.

For example: 'So, what you're saying is / If I understand correctly, you're having trouble cramming and planning?'

4. Reflecting without judging

Reflecting without judging means putting yourself in the position of your conversation partner. As a person, you can never truly be judgement-free. Forming judgements is only human. However,



what you can do as an active listener is take a step back and see your judgements for what they are: judgements, not absolute truths.

For example, when a student says they can only study at night, you could ask: 'How come you only study at night? What advantages are there to studying at night? Do you wish things were different?'

5. Avoiding leading questions

As educators, we often have the tendency to guide students in a certain direction with (well-intentioned) advice. We may find ourselves asking leading questions, with the desired answer already apparent in the question. This is not conducive to effective communication, as the student will be inclined to give 'the socially acceptable' answer rather than say what they truly mean.

For example, avoid: 'Don't you think you should do something about that?'

6. Asking open-ended questions

During a coaching conversation, it can be very useful to ask open-ended questions, so the student gets to say what they feel is important. As these questions can't be answered with 'yes' or 'no', they're well suited to probing for more information. Open-ended questions start with words or phrases like 'what', 'how', 'when', 'why', or 'to what extent'.

For example: 'To what extent would you say you're satisfied with your own study results?'

7. Digging deeper

In order to get a better understanding of the student's situation, it's important to dig deeper with follow-up questions. This also shows your interest and commitment. Even if you have the impression that the student doesn't go into details, it's important to keep asking questions. If a student remains rather passive, you should ask yourself whether you've been asking enough open-ended questions to dig deeper.

Non-verbal techniques

Body language is an integral part of any face-to-face conversation. Non-verbal active listening techniques include nodding, using encouraging interjections (mm-hmm, uh-huh), leaning slightly forward, and pointing your legs towards the speaker.

Boundaries and referral

- Why are boundaries important?

During coaching conversations with students, it's important to strike the right balance between proximity and distance, in order to respect one another's boundaries.

On the one hand, **proximity** is important. You want to help the student, which requires a certain level of empathy and involvement so you can establish a rapport and identify the student's needs. However, if you get too close or try to solve everything for the student, you can become too caring and over-involved, which crosses a boundary. Always keep in mind that offering support is not necessarily the same as offering solutions to everything.

On the other hand, keeping the appropriate **distance** is equally important. This is about the space you give the student and yourself. Not only literally or physically, but also mentally. If you don't provide enough space, you cross both the student's boundaries and your own. For example, you would be aggressively crossing the line with students if you are too controlling, overbearing or direct.

- How can you respect students' boundaries, as well as your own?

It's better to be safe than sorry. At the start of the conversation, and also later on in the conversation, be sure to mention that you'll be asking certain questions or responding in certain ways that may be new, different or sometimes unexpected to the student. Tell the student they shouldn't hesitate to point out if anything isn't working or seems harsh.



However, if you pick up on any signs of crossed boundaries, it is imperative that you intervene in time. You may notice these signs either in the student or in yourself, and they may differ depending on the situation.

If you cross the line in an **aggressive way**, the student will likely respond by breaking off contact.

If you get over-involved and cross the line in a **caring way**, the student may become too attached and dependent. But they might also break off contact because they feel smothered. Either way, it's important to refer students to the right experts without delay. Always keep your involvement in check.

- How, when and where to refer students

Timing is everything: refer someone too early and they may feel rejected; refer them too late and they may have already become too dependent on

you. To avoid misunderstandings, it's best to talk about the possibility of referral right from the first conversation.

Be sure and adamant about the need for a referral. If you appear ambivalent or uncertain, the person being referred will pick up on that. And be open. A referral may provoke feelings of rejection, so it's important to be honest and to emphasise that a referral is not a bad thing.

Referrals should never be forced. Try to stimulate the student to contact the department or colleague themselves. If you sense that the student will probably not take that first step when referral is advisable, you can make the initial phone call together, send an email with the student in CC, or even go to the first appointment together. It's up to you to decide what feels comfortable for you.

Summary

Coaching is a developmental approach to guiding students, with the task and the person going hand in hand. A coach works in a solution-oriented way, adopting an inquisitive attitude and considering the potentially different frames of reference that are at play. Listening, summarising and digging deeper form the basis of every coaching conversation. It's important to be aware of who you are as a coach and to focus on the student's past successes during the conversation. Verbal and non-verbal communication techniques are useful tools when conducting coaching conversations. Finally, if you notice that a line is being crossed – in either direction – or if you lack the appropriate expertise to provide the guidance needed, it's best to refer the student to a colleague with special expertise.



Want to know more?

Single session

In September/October 2021, ECHO is organising a **module** on '**Coaching basics**', together with the Study Advice and Student Counselling Services and the Diversity Team (in Dutch only).

<https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/centra/expertisecentrum-hoger-onderwijs/opleidingen/losse-sessies/coaching/>

Pintra

If you'd like to learn more about coaching skills and the guidance and support offer at UAntwerp, check out the Study Career Guidance page on Pintra:

https://pintra.uantwerpen.be/webapps/ua-pintrasite-BBLEARN/module/index.jsp?course_id= 144 1&l=nl PINTRA

ECHO Teaching Tips

In English

- [Want to get the best out of your students? Let's coach! \(February 2021\)](#)
- [What to do as a lecturer when a student panics? \(March 2021\)](#)

In Dutch

- [Doorstroom en diversiteit bij leerbedreigde studenten \(november 2017\)](#)
- [Feedbackgesprek \(januari 2015\)](#)
- [Coachen van studenten \(juni 2012\)](#)

Interesting literature

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Donders, W. (2016). *Coachende gespreksvoering*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Boom.

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, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boom/Nelissen.

Schelfhout, W., Tanghe, E., & Meeus, W. (2021). *Lesgeven is de MACS! Werkvormen voor activerend hybride onderwijs*. Antwerpen: Gompel&Svacina.

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

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