

BUILDING LIFELONG LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS THROUGH COACHING: INSIGHTS FROM A COACHING INTERVENTION WITH WORKPLACE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how coaching can serve as a key mechanism in fostering a support ecosystem for workplace learners on their lifelong learning journey. Unlike traditional students, workplace learners face added pressures from work, family, and study. Drawing on insights from a nine-month coaching intervention implemented in Singapore where workplace learners were supported through coaching conversations with either external professional coaches or internal coach-educators, this paper discusses how coaching helped learners with their goal setting process and cultivated self-directed habits essential for lifelong learning. Coaches' session notes provided a view into how coaches facilitated reflection, accountability, and meaning-making and how learners articulated, refined, and worked toward their goals over time. Their experiences suggest that coaching can be a meaningful support mechanism for workplace learners by helping them gain clearer sight of the goals they are working towards, while reinforcing learners' beliefs in their ability to grow and achieve these goals. For institutions building a coaching support ecosystem, investing in internal coaching capabilities provides a scalable and sustainable starting point. Over time, strategic deployment of both internal and external coaches can foster a richer and more adaptive learning support ecosystem.

BACKGROUND

Singapore's lifelong learning movement

The SkillsFuture movement, launched in 2015, is a nation-wide initiative that saw the development of various programmes and initiatives opened to all Singaporeans to enhance one's capabilities and employability. It encourages Singaporeans to reskill or upskill on competencies that are relevant for their area of work (Tan, 2017). Although the need for continuous learning is increasingly recognised in Singapore with more workplace learners

pursuing training to upskill and/or reskill (SkillsFuture Singapore, 2025), previous research highlighted that attrition rates, especially in the first year or semester of their courses, are greatest in workplace learners as life commitments take precedence over their studies (Stone and O'Shea, 2019).

Workplace learners are typically more diverse than traditional students in their expectations, goals, and motivations for their studies. A qualitative study of workplace learners by colleagues in the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) looked into the experiences of working adults who returned to complete their university education while juggling other commitments (e.g., work, marriage, childcare). They found that workplace learners faced multiple challenges, including greater work-related stress, poorer work-study-life balance, and difficulty managing personal-professional boundaries, alongside the usual academic pressures (Devilly et al., 2021). These findings underscore how workplace learners navigate multiple, and often competing, interests across work, academic commitments, and personal responsibilities. Such tensions shape how they approach learning and highlight why a holistic support mechanism is needed as part of a lifelong learning ecosystem.

While there is a body of research on encouraging lifelong learning and upskilling in Singapore (Gao et al., 2022; Maulod and Lu, 2020), there is still little research investigating how workplace learners can be supported as they transition between work and studies (Stone and O'Shea, 2019). To strengthen the lifelong learning movement in Singapore, perhaps it is time to look beyond creating training programmes for reskilling and upskilling, towards also providing support and intervention for workplace learners who enrol in these programmes. This paper, which presents preliminary insights drawn from a larger coaching study, is therefore supported under SkillsFuture Singapore's Workforce Development Applied Research Fund, which aims to explore approaches to supporting workplace learners in continuous learning.

Coaching as a support strategy

Coaching can be a tool for providing the support workplace learners need. Coaching is different from advising, teaching, or mentoring; it is best described as facilitating a conversation that unlocks one's potential to maximise their own performance (Redshaw, 2000). A coach typically takes a supporting role, and focuses on encouraging learners to learn for themselves, acquire new competencies, and develop more effective skills. Coaching tends to be self-perpetuating, wherein those who have been coached become good coaches themselves, coaching others or themselves (Redshaw, 2000).

This study investigates coaching, defined as “a one-to-one conversation focused on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate” (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018, p. 17). Ultimately, the process of coaching empowers coachees to identify personal barriers to performance, to self-coach, and to have a sense of self responsibility and ownership of their learning (MacLennan, 2017).

The roles of external professional coaches and internal coach-educators

The use of coaching in education has grown alongside a rising body of empirical research over the past decade (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Coaching is a personalised and dynamic intervention where a coach guides coachees in their professional and personal development through fostering a goal-oriented learning process. Professional coaches are trained to build awareness and facilitate personal growth across various domains of a coachee's life. Solms et al. (2022) found positive effects of a solution-focused coaching approach on improving

post-graduate students' well-being and formulating more effective goals. Professional coaches refer to those who have been trained, assessed and credentialled for coaching, though not usually subject matter experts in their coachee's field.

As coachees may find it easier to directly apply their learning when having been mentored by someone with years of experience in the same area of work (Omeechevarria, 2019), the literature has introduced the concept of a coach-educator who would be *"a person with substantial experience in the same professional field as the client, who also had sound experience of the [coaching] skills and processes of helping others to think things through"* (Pask & Joy, 2007, p. 18). Lawrence et al. (2018) found that a single coaching session with a certified coach-educator increased graduate students' self-awareness, reflection, and intentional professional development planning.

Since 2020, SIT has offered a two-day in-house coach training and assessment for all academic staff to build capability in engaging students through coaching conversations (Lim et al., 2023). The highly practice-oriented workshop covers core coaching fundamentals, with contextualised role plays and assessment of participants' skills. While coach-educators are not professionally certified, the coaching remains goal-directed.

The challenges workplace learners face may be attributed to juggling roles as student and employee and lacking a support system at home or at work. Providing access to coaches can help workplace learners navigate such work-study-life challenges. While both professional coaches and coach-educators facilitate reflective, goal-directed conversations, their backgrounds shape the nature of these interactions. Professional coaches bring coaching conversations with non-academic perspectives and often support broader personal or career-related goals, and areas that can enhance personal effectiveness, such as self-compassion. Coach-educators draw on their subject expertise and proximity to learners' academic journeys, using coaching conversations to translate insights into their studies, learning habits, and learning behaviours. Rather than viewing coach-educators and professional coaches as interchangeable, this study examines how each can contribute differently to a learning ecosystem, and how institutions might strategically adopt either or both approaches.

IMPLEMENTATION

This coaching study was offered to workplace learners from IT-related degree and specialist diploma programmes of two institutions of higher learning. All participants were in employment, either juggling study commitments simultaneously or alternating between work and study semesters. Participants were randomly assigned to either an external professional coach or internal coach-educator. After each coaching session, coaches submitted short session summaries documenting topics discussed, strategies explored, and reflections shared. These summaries offered qualitative insight into how learners engaged with coaching over time and inform the practice-based insights presented in this paper.

Professionally certified and accredited coaches delivered up to six coaching sessions over nine months to a group of workplace learners using a cognitive-behavioural, solution-focused framework (Grant et al., 2009). This approach emphasises strengths and goal attainment rather than problem analysis (Grant et al., 2010). After initial goal setting, coaches supported workplace learners through the self-regulation cycle by developing action plans and monitoring progress between sessions.

Coach-educators, full-time faculty who taught or were teaching the learners, also delivered up to six coaching sessions over nine months to a separate group of workplace learners.

Trained through SIT's 2-day workshop, they used the GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward) to structure sessions (Lim et al., 2023; Whitmore, 1992, 2017). Sessions began with goal setting, followed by examining the learner's current reality and resources, exploring options, and developing an action plan (Grant et al., 2010; Whitmore, 2017). This paper focuses on sharing insights about learners' goal-setting processes and how coaching supported progress toward their goals.

COACHING TO SUPPORT LIFELONG LEARNING

Coaches supported learners in revisiting and refining their goals in light of evolving circumstances. A coach-educator described this process: *"The session discussed a shift in some of the goals to better reflect the current work and academic requirements. Current practices and processes were reflected on and evaluated in comparison with the initial plans/goals."* Furthermore, coaching sessions often included exploration based on personal values, helping learners anchor their goals in personal meaning. As one professional coach noted, *"He explored his core values, such as authenticity, compassion, and learning, and is reflecting on how these values align with potential career paths."*

Supporting learners through an iterative and reflective approach to their goals likely made goals more realistic and fostered a greater sense of ownership and control. The act of co-construction and reflection on one's goals and plans for action are at the core of solution-focused coaching. The 'reflective space' created during coaching facilitates dialogue that can produce experiences of new insights and awareness for both coach and coachee (King et al., 2020). In their study, King et al. (2020) reported that coaching enabled the co-construction of goals and plans by supporting repeated instances of reflective thinking, which in turn encourages coachees to take action toward their own solution.

Workplace learners could work on both goals related to professional development as well as academics. A review of coaches' notes revealed that professional coaches tend to bring out goals that are more focused on professional growth and skill-building. Coach-educators tend to have more conversations on goals surrounding academic performance and academic life. Given that coach-educators are primarily educators with teaching responsibilities, equipping them with coaching skills offers a strategic way to enhance academic success without compromising their core role. It appeared that different types of assigned coaches may draw out different goals from the learners.

The coaches' notes also shed light on the goal planning process. Coaches engaged participants in activities that encouraged structured goal setting. One professional coach described having a focus on goal planning in the coaching sessions, stating that it led a participant to *"crystallise her goals a bit more and use the SMART template to articulate her goals more clearly that would allow her to easily track and work on her goals' progress."* Coaches also facilitated self-reflection and realistic appraisal. One professional coach noted, *"We explored the expectations that he holds for himself and this helped him to realise the need to examine his expectations to see if they are realistic."* Coaches played a role in maintaining accountability, as described in another quote by a coach-educator: *"Try to break that down into something where they could be, you know, accountable to themselves and make kind of small progress and understanding what's the kind of minimal step for progress in each of those goals."* These findings highlight that while goal planning skills were being developed, learners were likely still early in the process of developing autonomy and consistency in goal planning.

Finally, coaches emphasised the importance of affirmation and encouragement, which appeared to foster learners' confidence and intrinsic motivation for working towards their goals. For example, one professional coach noted the experience of *"providing ongoing*

support and acknowledging the client's progress to reinforce positive behaviours and confidence." The consistent reinforcement and affirmation from one's coach may be seen as a mechanism through which learners began to recognise their own progress and capabilities. This has been demonstrated in studies such as Will et al. (2019), where the authors found that coaches' positive supportive behaviour was found to be important at every stage, from contacting coachees to concluding the coaching session.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

This paper discusses how coaching, delivered by either internal coach-educators or external professional coaches, may be a strategy for providing support to workplace learners in lifelong learning programmes. Insights from a nine-month coaching programme suggest that coaching from both coach-educators and professional coaches helped learners gain clearer sight of the goals they are working towards, while reinforcing learners' beliefs in their ability to grow and achieve these goals.

Coaching as an intervention has important implications for advancing lifelong learning in Singapore, particularly in moving beyond a skills-focused model (Tan, 2017). A key challenge Singapore currently faces in the promotion of lifelong learning is the "lack of a strong lifelong learning culture that underscores not just skills but also the habits of mind needed for lifelong learning" (Tan, 2017, p. 17). As noted by then Senior Minister and now President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Singapore must aspire to a culture similar to that of Germany and Switzerland, one that values mastery and earns respect through deep expertise (Shanmugaratnam, 2015). A natural next step in advancing such a culture is to strengthen learners' ability to direct, manage, and sustain their own development. Another suggestion is the implementation of workplace coaching and mentoring as a strategic solution, targeting individual and organisational performances and sustainable well-being (Lim & Ibrahim, 2024). As noted above, workplace learners often juggle competing demands across life, work, and study, making it difficult for them to engage meaningfully with one's learning goals. Coaching offers a structured space for learners to pause, reflect, and make sense of these demands, and in doing so, helps cultivate the habits of mind needed for lifelong learning, such as clarity of purpose and self-awareness. These habits complement Singapore's broader lifelong learning agenda by reinforcing not only the acquisition of new skills, but also the deeper dispositions that enable learners to continue learning across different stages of their lives and careers.

As universities support a growing population of workplace learners, developing internal coaching capability through faculty training offers a sustainable entry point. Educators may be trained to add coaching to their "toolbox" and guide learners' reflection through questions rather than providing answers (Grant, 2012). Shahdadpuri et al. (2024) outlined ways to build coaching capability and culture within the education context. Professional coaches can then be strategically engaged for structured, deeper reflection outside the purview of academic support, for example, during major transitions or with at-risk learners. Their external positioning provides psychological distance, allowing learners to openly explore broader life and personal matters (Jones et al., 2016), while coach-educators support ongoing, more spontaneous conversations at identified coachable moments.

While coaching is a valuable support mechanism, there are considerations for implementation. Training educators with in-house coaching programmes can strengthen their coaching skills and foster a culture of coaching within higher education institutions (Shahdadpuri et al., 2024). However, coach-educators are often stretched by their primary job responsibilities, leaving them little time or energy to engage learners in coaching conversations. This is an important consideration for institutions attempting to build internal coaching capacity as it may be necessary to consider protecting time for coaching within

one's workload. Engaging professionally trained and accredited coaches may be an alternative effective solution. However, this can be costly and require larger budgets. Institutions considering external coaches should weigh financial implications, decide how costs are passed on through training fees, and identify which learners to engage. Low-bono or pro-bono coaching may also be possible from coaches accruing hours for accreditation.

In conclusion, coaching can serve as a key mechanism in fostering a support ecosystem for workplace learners on their lifelong learning journey. We should support lifelong learning not just through and for skills training, but by fostering habits of mind such as self-direction and reflection, which are essential for cultivating a sustainable culture of lifelong learning.

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