

Using the 3 'C's to Unlock Student Success: A Closer Look at a Coaching Approach to Personal Tutoring

Lisa Gannon
Leeds Trinity University

ABSTRACT

An environment of high-quality personalised and successful personal tutoring supported through effective staff development, reflection, and evaluation can help universities to meet their regulatory requirements, such as the Office for Students' B Conditions, specifically B1, B2 and B3. These conditions stipulate providers must establish practices which ensure "*high quality, reliable and positive outcomes for all students*" (Office for Students, 2022).

The reflective process of coaching can help support students to address issues in their personal, academic, or professional life (ICL, 2023). Effective coaching can provide a forum for student stories to be turned into strategies, which will enhance the student experience, leading to success.

The training of staff and delivery of this approach to personal tutoring across HE is varied and inconsistent. Through a synthesis of coaching theory and models, this paper takes a practical look at 'how' coaching practices can be applied within a personal tutoring session. It provides a practical framework and methodology for those wanting to adopt a coaching approach for the first time, based around the three 'C's - 'Connecting', 'Contracting' and 'Conversations'.

This framework has been adopted in what has become mandatory training for all personal tutors based at one UK HE institution and is used as a structure for interactions with and development of students.

KEYWORDS

Student Success; Coaching

Introduction

It has been recognised that adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring facilitates the development of resilient, self-confident and self-reliant individuals (Seraj & Leggett, 2023), and that learner-centred coaching approaches, based on relational pedagogy, can be a useful way of framing positive, developmental tutor: tutee conversations (Gurbutt and Gurbutt, 2015; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2018).

Since relational pedagogy is grounded in trust, relationship building, belonging, transparency and co-creation of meaning and learning (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2018), it provides an effective basis to inform personal tutoring training and practice. Felton and Lambert (2020) illustrate how *“relationships impact considerably upon students’ experiences of higher education”*; thus, *“meaningful connections with tutors are crucial”*. This relational pedagogy can, and should inform our learning, teaching and academic experience strategies within Higher Education.

Relational pedagogy complements a coaching approach to personal tutoring as both adopt a dialogic and active student role in which they are encouraged to reach their potential. Coaching entails *“helping them to learn rather than teaching them”* (Whitmore, 2009) and works to develop students’ study strategies by equipping them with tools to deal with challenging situations whilst encouraging them to embrace new opportunities. Coaching approaches help by setting the foundations for change. By beginning the reflective process, which will be a new skill for many students, coaching facilitates their clarity of thinking providing a platform for action moving forwards. Effective coaching can help provide students with the confidence and skills to address issues in their personal, academic, or professional life and has been supported by ICL (2023) and Bandura (2023).

Coaching also draws upon emotion and motivation to help direct behaviour and well-being within a social context, based on some of the techniques highlighted in the Self Determination Theory (SDT), first proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985). The SDT suggests that all individuals possess three universal and psychological needs—autonomy (feeling self-governed and self-endorsed), competence (feeling competent and effective), and relatedness (feeling connected, loved, interacted)—that move them to act or not to act.

Coaching works around the premise of leverage—this is the same for personal tutoring. The students will engage if they see benefit from being present, or consequence for not turning up. With a preference for the ‘carrot over stick approach’, each encounter with their personal tutor must be deemed meaningful, and beneficial, for each individual student. Otherwise, they are unlikely to fully engage.

Within the context of personal tutoring, it is important to recognise that each tutorial is not just an opportunity for a chat or a ‘check in’ with the students. Used effectively, a coaching approach can function as a development tool and a play key part of their on-going education.

By adopting a coaching approach to personal tutoring through Connecting (relational pedagogy), Contracting (setting the boundaries of roles and expectations) and structuring clearly focused coaching Conversations, it is proposed that students will experience an enhanced feeling of autonomy, mastery and purpose, which has been specifically linked to intrinsic motivation (Pink, 2018) and satisfaction Lozano-Jiménez et al. (2021).

The rest of this paper will introduce the three ‘C’s of coaching, a methodology which brings about successful personal tutoring interactions. Through exploration of each of the three ‘C’s,

a clear framework for adopting a coaching approach to personal training will be provided. These 'C's represent 'Connection', 'Contracting' and 'Conversation'.

Method – Explaining the 3 C's stages of coaching

CONNECTION – I see you; I hear you; I understand you

Relational pedagogies are based around meaningful relationships being fundamental to effective learning. The connection between tutor and tutee is all about trust, empathy and being present. It is crucial that the student recognises that, as a personal tutor you see them, hear them and understand them; this connection is vital if you are to be an effective personal tutor. A coaching approach allows students to take the metaphorical blinkers off and provide clarity of thinking, but this will only happen where they have made a good connection with their personal tutor. This is especially important in the initial interactions where first impressions are lasting.

The relational pedagogy is central to your effectiveness and credibility as a coach, and in this case, personal tutor. What a student thinks when they first meet their personal tutor will determine how they feel and, in turn, how they behave and what decisions they make about sharing information and engaging in future conversations.

Think – feel – behave (we are what we think)

The physical environment is also important. Consider where you are meeting. Are they sitting on a lower chair than you; is it an intimidating office; what is your body language like, are you looking at a screen, do they have your undivided attention? All these small details can make a difference in developing trust.

It is vital during the connecting phase to first assess the needs of the tutee as a person, rather than using their time to just talk at them particularly if they are quiet. One of the common issues with personal tutoring is to go down a tick list of things to 'tell the student.' This may be very valuable information but how do we know they are ready to receive it? We are all different, and we need to make the connection before communicating content.

It is important to recognise that you cannot coach a suit of armour, and you must first get to know the individual student beneath the armour. Who are they? What's their motivation for being there? What does success look like to them? What is occupying their headspace at that particular time?

To connect with our personal tutee, we must recognise that they are not just students; they may be carers, parents, part time workers, flatmates, siblings, athletes, musicians, to name a few. Likewise, we are not just job titles or labels (Professor, Reader, Lecturer). We should not make assumptions about a person based on their title, age, gender, background or other characteristics. First and foremost, we are all people with different lived experiences. We are

all multifaceted in the roles we play and have individual reasons for why we play them. Only by recognising this can we help turn our tutee's own individual stories into strategies for success, and success will be different for every single student.

Finally, in terms of connecting, we should be listening intently. Twice as much as we are talking. We have two ears and one mouth, and this is an indication of the talk to listen ratio that should take place in a coaching session.

This may change as we progress through the levels as we may tend to mentor more initially but as a rule of thumb your sessions should find your tutee talking more than you.

In terms of active listening, one strategy to show your tutee that you have heard them correctly is by paraphrasing what they have communicated to you, allowing them to understand that their voice has been heard and understood. This understanding is key to making this vital connection. Your questions should follow on from their dialogue rather than being scripted. This way every student tutorial should be different and permit the opportunity for the student to enhance the information they share with you, developing the personalised connection further.

CONTRACTING – Setting the scene and boundaries – all about expectations

Contracting is arguably the most important phase when you are scene setting with students, but often the one which is most overlooked. It is an opportunity to explore basic boundaries around how they respond to challenging questions and preferences for how and where the tutorials are conducted and recorded. It is also important for the tutor to remember, and the tutee to recognise, that you are not a counsellor. You may, however, be able to guide them to other services if necessary.

The contracting phase also opens up opportunities to ask questions such as:

Have you ever been coached before? What do you think my role is here? What are your expectations?

Importantly, how much time do we have and what would be a good outcome from this meeting for you?

Within personal tutoring some of these questions will change whether there is a group or individual present. Contracting is also the phase where, once a connection has been established, we encourage the students to come with a specific issue or challenge to address. This will develop as they progress through the levels.

Contracting provides the opportunity for you and the student to consider and reflect upon their appetite for growth? Depending on the individual and the rapport built between tutor and tutee, it is also possible to explore the idea that 'We can be comfortable, or we can grow', being mindful of how the tutee responds to challenge, perhaps introducing the concept of bringing about change in order to develop. To improve is to change – do you want to improve?

This may seem obvious, but we can often feel anxious about change. As a personal tutor, and only if appropriate, you may wish to explore the question, 'What are your perceptions of change?' It is important to emphasise here that any changes discussed should be identified by the tutee rather than the tutor, with the key to a continued positive connection coming from a supportive relationship, not a critical one.

The following questions are examples of others that you may wish to ask during the contracting phase:

What is occupying your thoughts most at the moment?

Do you have any goals?

What do you respond well to? This is important; it allows the personal tutor to learn more about the individual student and how open they are to challenge prior to the main conversation.

Remember, continuing from the connecting phase, it is important to build upon and develop your listening skills. What do you hear within the responses to any contracting questions? What keywords is the student using? Are they hesitant about their circumstances using terms like "*I might/may*" or "*I will*"? Are they telling you things that they don't like, or are they looking forward? All of the student's answers provide clues to their current mindset and help you begin to understand how to best build and facilitate the final stage of the tutorial, the conversation.

CONVERSATION - a structured, issue-based discussion leading to a personalised action plan

Moving from the contracting phase, the coaching conversation allows a more focused approach and should help the student to:

- i) analyse their priorities – identify the key issues they are facing.
- ii) think differently about their circumstances by considering versatile perspectives.
- iii) recognise that it may be time for change (their behaviour/styles of communication)
- iv) Consider their strategy.
- v) Set measurable goals.

The conversation should result in a tangible action plan that is agreed upon before the tutorial (coaching conversation) closes. By the end of the conversation the tutee (not the tutor) should be sharing what they are going to do before the next meeting, and this can be noted by both parties.

So, how should the tutor/coach go about the conversation?

Many discovery frameworks have been developed, and all use acronyms to remind the coach of steps that can be used to work through a session with their coachee/tutee. Examples include OSCAR (Whittleworth and Gilbert, 2002 cited in Gilbert and Whittleworth 2009) (Figure 1), CLEAR (Hawkins, 1980 cited in Hawkins 2012) (Figure 2), TORCH (BCA) (Figure 4) and the popular GROW model (Whitmore, 1996) (Figure 3).



Figure 1 - The OSCAR model, based on Whittleworth and Gilbert (2002).

These frameworks provide a structure and examples of questions which can encourage the student to consider their options, discuss their challenges and find potential solutions to issues.

Each coaching conversation, supported by a chosen framework, starts with the tutor asking the tutee to articulate what issues they are facing or what a good outcome from the meeting would be. e.g. What would you be happy leaving this meeting with?

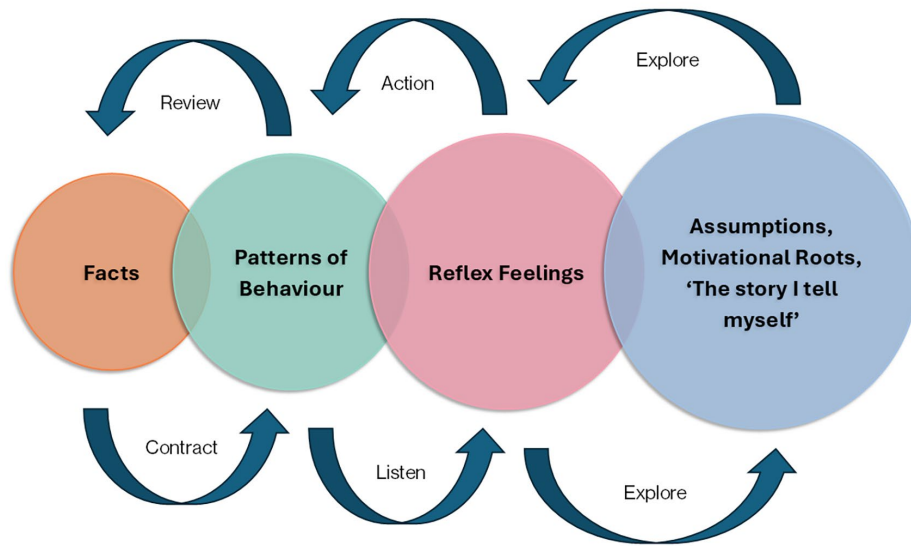


Figure 2 - The CLEAR coaching model, based on Hawkins (2012)



Figure 3 - The GROW model, based on Whitworth (1992)

After listening and adapting to the response the tutor should go on to explore what is going on right now in the student’s current situation. Tutors can then encourage students to try to identify what obstacles or difficulties they face (e.g., lack of confidence, relationships, lack of specific knowledge, finance, health issues, etc.) and then move on to what options or choices are available to them.

Topic	What's on your mind? (Personal, prof, academic)	What do you need my help with?	What's holding you back?
Contract (phase)			
Objective	What specifically do you hope to gain from this session?	What is your key challenge?	What does success look like?
Road Blocks	Why haven't you solved it already?	What's stopping you from achieving this?	What have you tried already?
Choices	What choices do you have?	What else could you do?	What are the benefits and challenges of each?
How?	So what will you commit to? Accountability - 3 measures of success (ROI)	How high is your commitment: 1-100? (commitment to action)	When precisely will this happen? (time lines for action)

Figure 4 - The Business Coaching Academy (2025) TORCH model

By adopting a coaching approach, listening acutely, and asking the right questions an effective personal tutor will facilitate the student to progress within the conversation to finally consider the actions that they are most comfortable adopting. Whilst the tutor may decide to step out of the coaching role and offer a suggestion as a mentor, for example, if the actions proposed were unrealistic or potentially harmful, it is important to recognise that the actions are to be identified by the student and not the tutor.

It may be that the tutor could help facilitate an action. For example, it could be as simple as guiding them to specialist student support in terms of finance or learning support, discussing options if they are unhappy in their accommodation, or encouraging them to consider the value of specific work experience and how they may secure this. The support they need may be academic, personal, or professional. However, the key in all cases is to coach the solutions out of the students rather than the tutor providing the student with what they believe is the answer.

Asking specific questions based on what has been said by the tutee, not based on what you are thinking, is fundamental to an effective coaching conversation.

By summarising at the end of the conversation, the student will recognise that making certain changes might help them with their academic work, their career prospects, their network and their personal relationships. Ultimately, positive conversations can lead to positive outcomes.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, personal tutors across HE seek to support all of their students. That said, the skill set, training, and backgrounds of the diverse community of personal tutors across the sector often result in disparate practices and varied approaches to communication with individual students.

There are also issues related to engaging students in the first place, and this paper is limited to the framework and suggestions linked to a coaching approach. It does not tackle the wider issues of whether all academic staff should be personal tutors, whether personal tutor slots should be timetabled, and how staff with large cohorts of students have time to see them all for meaningful conversations. Those wider issues remain unresolved.

Coaching also takes practice, and the framework suggested only provides an insight into how it can work. The nuances of listening and asking the most pertinent and impactful questions only come with time and experience.

By training all academic staff to implement the 3 'C's, using Connection, Contracting and Conversations to form the basis of each interaction, HE institutions can acknowledge that they are investing in personal tutoring whilst consistently giving the students the confidence to believe in themselves and their decision making.

Adopting a coaching approach involves seeing, listening, understanding, setting boundaries and expectations and structuring personalised conversations into coherent, student-led action plans. Using the 3 'C's can help a personal tutor make a difference by allowing the individual to develop personally, professionally, or academically through their own thinking.

About the Author/s

Dr Lisa Gannon is an Associate Professor and researcher with strong connections to professional practice. Her approach is grounded in coaching and holistic people development, which began with her experience as an international gymnast. She later transitioned into coaching, guiding athletes from recreational and disability levels to world-class competitors.

In addition to her academic expertise and publications on bone health, Lisa is a qualified corporate coach and has supported senior executives from a wide range of sectors and within her role as a Non-Executive Director for a National Governing Body (NGB). These experiences led to the creation of an innovative project, where she has spearheaded mandatory staff training courses across Leeds Trinity University, focused on implementing a 'coaching approach to personal tutoring.'

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of William Heathcote, Digital Pedagogy Advisor, Leeds Trinity University, in preparing the illustrations for this article.

ORCID

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9360-3727>

References

Bandura, A. (2023). Cultivate self-efficacy for personal and organizational effectiveness. *Principles of Organizational Behavior: The Handbook of Evidence-Based Management* 3rd Edition, pp. 113-135.

- Business Coaching Academy (2025). <https://thebcacademy.com>
- Chiu, T. K. (2022). Applying the self-determination theory (SDT) to explain student engagement in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 54(sup1), S14-S30.
- Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2018). Ethics of academic leadership: Guiding learning and teaching. In F. Su & M. Wood (Eds.), *Cosmopolitan perspectives on academic leadership in higher education* (pp. 175-191). Bloomsbury
- Critchley, B. (2010). Relational coaching: Taking the coaching high road. *Journal of Management Development*, 29(10), (pp. 851-863).
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Felten, P., & Lambert, L. M. (2020). *Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive success in college*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gilbert, A., & Whittleworth, K. (2009). *The OSCAR coaching model*. Worth Consulting Ltd. UK.
- Gurbutt, D. and Gurbutt, R. (2015). Empowering students to promote independent learning: A project utilising coaching approaches to support learning and personal development. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 8.
- Hawkins, P. (2012). *Creating a coaching culture: Developing a coaching strategy for your organization*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Hunaiti, Z. (2021). Introducing coaching to higher education. In *Coaching Applications and Effectiveness in Higher Education* (pp. 1-20). IGI Global.
- Imperial College London (2023). *Coaching for personal tutors in action*. Imperial College London. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/personal-tutors-guide/developing-students/coaching/coaching-for-personal-tutors-in-action/>
- Lozano-Jiménez, J.E., Huéscar, E. and Moreno-Murcia, J.A. (2021). From autonomy support and grit to satisfaction with life through self-determined motivation and group cohesion in higher education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, p.579492.
- Office For Students (2022) *Conditions of registration - Office for Students*
- Pink, D (2018) *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Canongate Books Ltd.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2019). Supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness: The coaching process from a self-determination theory perspective. In S. English, J. M. Sabatine, & P. Brownell (Eds.), *Professional coaching: Principles and practice* (pp. 231-245). Springer Publishing Company
- Ryan, R., and Deci, E. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemp. Educ. Psychol.* 61:101860. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>
- Seraj, S., & Leggett, R. (2023). The challenges of personal tutoring in higher education: Applying a coaching approach at a UK higher education institution. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 21(1), (pp. 85-98).
- Whitmore, J. (2009) *Coaching for Performance: GROWing Human Potential and Purpose - the Principles and Practice of Coaching and Leadership* (4th Edition) (People Skills ... and Practices of Coaching and Leadership, Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing
- Whitmore, J. (1996) *Coaching for Performance*. Nicholas. Brealey Pub., London