

People on the edges of society usually assume higher education is out of their reach, but Goldsmiths College's Open Book Scheme is challenging that – and coaching is helping make a difference.

Marcus Morgan investigates

**W**hen Michele Grant came across a project designed to welcome into higher education people who never dreamt that university could be a part of their story, she was intrigued.

Open Book was a scheme at the University of London's Goldsmiths College, managed by a small, dedicated team with backgrounds of offending, addiction or mental health problems.

As a coach, Michele was used to working with people who wanted to make a change in their lives and was struck by how much the students at Open Book might gain from a coaching relationship alongside their educational journey. With her fellow practitioner, Tamsin Slyce, an executive coach and director of Talking Talent, they decided to bring together a team of executive coaches to work with the students.

Almost two years later, the scheme's successes have been documented by Marcus Morgan, a

sociologist and Fellow of Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge.

Here he shares what he has discovered about the power of executive coaches to spread the benefits of their skills.

#### **Client feedback**

Ignorant to the world of coaching, but intrigued by its apparently transformative effects, I arranged to interview some of the coaches and clients on the Open Book scheme to try to find out what were the secrets to successful coaching with this client group.

For most of the Open Book students I talked to, engaging in higher education was a path perceived to lie far from their anticipated life course. The university was inevitably a somewhat alien environment that demanded new competencies. Coaching helped support them in their development.

Jane, a student who had previously struggled with drinking and substance misuse, reported that coaching had

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offered her the practical confidence to “ask questions in seminars and classes”, allowing her to be an active participant rather than a passive spectator in her higher education journey.

Other clients told me that what they valued most in their coaching sessions was the disarmingly simple matter of just having someone to talk to and, in particular, someone who was not directly invested – emotionally or otherwise – in their lives; a condition that disqualified many family members, friends, criminal justice representatives and probation services.



## “What clients valued most in coaching was the disarmingly simple matter of just having someone to talk to”

‘Having someone to talk to’ took on far greater proportions in situations where other such people had fallen away. For example, in the case of Jordan, a student who had served a prison sentence for burglary, the stigma of incarceration had resulted in family members withdrawing interest in his life. Letters sent to his grandparents while in prison had been met with silence.

Jordan told me how important it was to have “someone informal” to talk to, stressing how “the fact that you don’t know them and yet you can explore every avenue, makes it very productive”.

Students also spoke of valuing the sense that they were engaged in a relationship of exchange, especially when their coaches shared experiences from their own lives. Sharing was not seen as a lapse of the coach’s professionalism, but a key to establishing equality.

Sheila, for example, had recently undergone treatment for cancer and expressed the difficulties she had faced in explaining the illness to her children. Hearing how her coach’s friend hadn’t worked while undergoing similar treatment, and also the way her coach might have gone about telling her own children, gave her the confidence to take time off and explain her illness to her children – a “really huge step for me”.

### Highly committed

Since most Open Book students have overcome challenging obstacles to gain access to university, they are typically far more self-conscious of their reasons for attending, compared to students whose transit into higher education is taken for granted. As a result, they are often highly committed to involving themselves in learning processes:



a mindset well-suited to facilitating a productive coaching relationship. In this sense, the timing of the coaching appears crucial. Jane reminded me of this most clearly when she said that coaching simply “wouldn’t have worked when I was drinking and using... I wouldn’t have been able to turn up to the sessions”.

Nevertheless, not all the clients were automatically warm to the proposal. Sheila, for example, explained that before meeting her coach, “I thought we’d have nothing in common because we don’t share any experiences... we’re from such different



Previous page (top): University of London's Goldsmiths College; (bottom) Michele Grant, director of Rising Minds. Below: Tamsin Slyce, director of Talking Talent



backgrounds"; quickly adding, "I was wrong – I feel like she really gets me; I'd really hate to stop seeing her now."

Jordan likewise told me, "I was dubious when they first told me that there was this life coaching thing. I was like, 'What? Another person to chat to for ages and they're just gonna tell me what their opinion is?' Yet I'm really glad I followed it through because it's been very productive... it helps, it really does. It might not seem like it, it might seem we just chat rubbish for an hour, or talk about things in a very generalised way, but it really does help me deal with things and keep looking forward."

Encouraged by the focus that coaching has given him, Jordan spoke enthusiastically of his ultimate ambition to transform his prison experience into a positive agenda and feed into 'national dialogue' around youth crime issues.

### Negative expectations

This theme of initial apprehension giving way to welcome surprise, was often related to negative past experiences with other forms of

professional intervention. I quickly learnt that Open Book students have usually been disproportionately exposed to such interventions, sometimes willingly, sometimes less so. These were often felt by the students to be premised on the notion that the service providers always knew what was right for them and had a stock of pre-defined expert solutions to generic problems.

Sheila, for instance, described how a therapist she had seen in the past "looked like he had his eyes painted on", was inattentive to what she was trying to express, and gave off the air that he was "just going through the motions".

Similarly, Pete, who had previously been referred to a consultant psychiatrist for mental health issues, relayed how the psychiatrist had told him "to go away, take medicine, and go back to see my doctor if it got any worse".

While these experiences highlight bad practice on the part of the individual professionals, their significance loomed large in clients' negative expectations of what coaching might involve; expectations that quickly dissolved once coaching began.

### Upping our game

Open Book coaching has also been a learning experience for the coaches themselves, many of whom remarked how, in spite of radically differing circumstances, the issues raised by the students (confidence, self-worth, practical organisation, and so on) were very similar to those they had heard from their executive clients in the City, the public sector, or other organisations.

I was also told by one coach how working with Open Book clients had encouraged her to "up my game", and by another

how it had helped him to develop a greater sense of "professional responsibility, realising that the stakes can sometimes be high".

### Genuine exchange

Coaches also emphasised the enormous personal satisfaction they gained from being involved in democratising a beneficial practice that was not automatically accessible to all.

Remarkably, this satisfaction was in turn picked up by many of the Open Book clients I spoke to, who again interpreted it as contributing to the sense that a genuine form of exchange was taking place within the sessions.

In a political climate in which the moribund British public university is increasingly struggling to provide access to students from so-called 'non-traditional backgrounds', my investigations found Open Book coaching to be exemplary in assisting bright and capable students who confront relative systematic disadvantage in their aspirations to engage in higher education.

The introduction of coaching into higher educational environments looks set for a bright future, and it appears to me that schemes such as this are setting standards for others to follow. ■

● The Open Book scheme is now a project of Rising Minds, a coaching and mindfulness social enterprise set up by Michele Grant and fellow Open Book coach Tim Segaller. For more details about the scheme and other Rising Minds projects email: [info@risingminds.org.uk](mailto:info@risingminds.org.uk)

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