

The effectiveness of the equestrian syllabus: equitation science in tertiary education

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Abstract

Traditionally equestrian skills were gained through an apprenticeship model, and although this is still a way of gaining accreditation universities and colleges have adopted equestrianism as part of their programme, opening it to the broader mainstream educational models moving it away from an isolated accreditation system. This paper evaluates equestrianism as a tertiary subject and makes the recommendation that there is a need for tertiary level Equine Science education however this should not be at the expense of practical knowledge. By adopting a Competency Based Education and Training (CBE/T) syllabus as part of the National Consortium for Academics and Sports (NCAS), equestrian coaching can now be learned as part of an equestrian science degree. The study discussed equestrian coaching with coaches in England who hold the first, second and third levels of accreditation, as well as elite riders who coached. The findings indicated that universities and colleges are in danger of producing students who do not always have the skills needed for the equestrian industry.

Key words: skills, apprenticeship, theory, horse, coach

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the empirical data from my PhD thesis, which suggests that universities and colleges do not necessarily produce equestrian coaches equipped to coach within the industry. The research indicates that unless the students have equestrian skills prior to enrolling in the degree programmes (offered by university and colleges), the teaching skills they attain are not necessarily transferable from an assed practice to one in a real life environment. Research for the PhD was undertaken in England where higher education programmes are well-established.

Universities and colleges have adopted the British Horse Society (BHS) syllabus, which has based the accreditation around the requirements of the equestrian industry. Theoretically this means that the graduates are as well prepared for equestrian coaching as those who trained from the more traditional approaches.

Prior to the involvement of the higher education sector, equestrians wishing to follow a career path coaching horse riding gained accreditation by either working in the equestrian industry and having a mentor to help them work through the syllabus; or working in the riding school environment, which offered an apprenticeship style of learning. Learning to coach by

whichever of the two options, meant that students acquired their coaching skills by coaching paying clients learning to ride.

Despite the professional bodies endeavour to professionalise equestrianism through the accreditation programmes, there is no legal requirement to be accredited to give riding lessons in England. However many equestrians do wish to gain qualifications and follow an accredited career path, which can be achieved through the BHS system. The BHS created a three tiered qualification framework to accredit equestrian coaches. Students have to achieve a given standard in riding, horse-management and coaching and pass all three components (at whichever level of accreditation they are taking) to obtain the full coaching accreditation. For example the British Horse Society Assistant Instructor (BHSAI) coaching qualification is assessed at the first, second and third stages for horse management and riding however, whilst working toward the riding and horse-management at the 1st level the students also have to:

- gain a riding and road safety section,
- an equine specific first aid certificate,
- attend a child protection training day.

On attaining the 3rd stage of riding and horse-management the students then take the preliminary teaching tests (PTT) to complete the accreditation (www.bhs.co.uk). Once obtained the qualifications have national, and in some countries international recognition.

Equestrian students can and still do follow the traditional routes to train and gain accreditation however, in the early 1990s higher education institutions also introduced equestrian studies into their programmes. In addition to the many equine science degrees on offer (see appendix i for a list) students may also be given the option of gaining an equestrian coaching qualification whilst studying for the degree of choice. If students choose to take the option of working toward an equestrian coaching accreditation whilst studying they will follow the BHS syllabus.

The syllabus has, and continues to undergo changes to enable it to appeal to the modern equestrian. One such change is the adoption of evaluating skills through a Competency Based Education and Training (CBE/T) assessment strategy rather than a final examination. Another change is that the BHS has also encompassed coaching philosophies and paradigms into the equestrian syllabus.

Further change to equestrian accreditation system has been made through a government funded initiative to standardise coaching of all sports was introduced through the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC). The introduction of this coaching accreditation has allowed equestrian coaching to be part of the national sporting accreditation framework (Jones, 2006). The UKCC is a coaching qualification that endorses existing or new teaching qualifications (shown in appendix ii) irrespective of the sport. In other words coaching equestrian skills have to conform to a framework that is inclusive of all sports and does not take into consideration the distinctive difference the horse makes in the riding lesson.

Aligning equestrianism to the broader sports coaching framework indicates that equestrian accreditation is moving away from an isolated accreditation system into a broader construct. The broader sports coaching framework has introduced coaching theories and a more scholarly approach suitable for the higher education environments. The paper will consider the ramifications of the changes based upon the interviews of graduates and assessors. Using data from the observations of the riding lessons given by the university and college graduates, and interviews from assessors, I will begin to understand if or not universities and colleges are or not producing equestrian coaches equipped to coach within the industry.

Method

The Data Gathering Process

The paper is drawing from the research for my PhD thesis. I utilise qualitative methodology following Patton's (2002) directives to gather empirical data using recorded interviews and observed riding lessons. The research design begins with a descriptive study from which to create a comparative study between the participants and the accreditations they hold. I implemented an open ended interview that was created around six key questions (shown in Appendix iii) to stimulate conversation and avoid limitation to the data (Patton, 2002). The questions were devised from the analysis of the syllabus and using my own level of expertise as a qualified BHS Intermediate Instructor and competition rider. Answers given were used to create the next question and as questions were developed they were subsequently given to the following participants. During the interviews I did not select what was said, advise or direct what was said or how it was said. Thus similarities and differences could be established and patterns and themes recognised following an inductive process. The

interviews were transcribed and the participants sent a copy for agreement that their interview could be included in the research.

Observation of the riding lessons, were employed because they are considered to be a true representation of teaching practice (Wimmer and Dominick 2005). To record the lessons a tick box was devised from the assessors check lists, which they use when assessing students, the syllabus and literature so that the observations indicated aspects relevant to the research question. Patton (2002) suggests that personal expertise is deemed an important part of the enquiry to understand the phenomenon and therefore my personal knowledge was applied to assess the lessons.

The syllabus chosen to underpin the research is from the British Horse Society (BHS). It is the predominant accreditation for equestrian coaching, and the syllabus used by the universities and colleges. The syllabus is developed by an elected committee of equestrians (some of whom were participants) who hold voluntary positions and do not directly gain from their position on the board.

Participants

The participants were recruited from the training bodies' coaching lists available on their websites; through advertisements in equestrian outlets and from a snowballing effect where participant recommends others (Patton, 2002). Elite riders who coach riding (irrespective of their qualifications status) were included in the study because their teaching is based upon riding/competing expertise and they are considered by the equestrian bodies to be experts in the given field (Patton, 2002). Participants were emailed and if I received a positive response they were phoned and arrangements were made for the interview and observation to take place. They were emailed in advance the key questions and letter of thanks and ethics approval for the study prior to our meeting. From the original 41 participants the paper will focus on the data of the post-graduates who have graduated through the university and college systems, and the BHS qualified coaches who assess undergraduates for the BHS coaching accreditations. Therefore, the data from four assessors and four students, who have experience in the university and college environments, will be used for this paper. Each participant was given a code for identification numbering 1- 41 and their accreditation level.

Data Analysis Techniques

Analysis of the data for the paper was through inductive analysis to condense the extensive data into a summary of findings (Patton, 2002). The process of analysis began by reading and re-reading the transcripts and the data from the interviews. Focus was given to each level and each group within that level, which were 'crossed with one another' (Patton, 2002, p. 468). This process continued with each level of accreditation and group thus 'moving backwards and forwards between the actual data in search of meaningful patterns' (Patton, 2002, p. 468). By following Patton's (2002) directives I am able to supply data for the paper that is not presenting my own views but fully supporting the participant's expressions at the time of interview.

Findings

When I discussed the training systems and new accreditations that are offered to students with those who assessed them I was made aware that the English qualifications are not held in as high regard as they once were. A critique was that the graduates from universities and colleges do not have high level of equestrian coaching skills because they are learning to coach by coaching each other. This is problematic because learning in this way does not give them the skills to transfer the knowledge gained into a real life environment.

To support or negate the claim that universities and colleges are producing students who do not always have the skills needed for the equestrian industry, I will use sections of the interviews (taken from the participants) that are relevant to this issue. It is interesting to note that all the participants in the study are creating income as equestrian coaches.

The post-graduates reasons for training for equestrian accreditation within the university and college systems

By adopting a Competency Based Education and Training (CBE/T) syllabus as part of the National Consortium for Academics and Sports (NCAS), equestrian coaching can now be learned as part of an equestrian science degree. The participants chose this method to gain accreditation because it allows them a choice in their career whilst studying. For example two of the participants were not clear as to the direction they wanted to take. One stated that she '*didn't go there [college] specifically to get the teaching qualification. The course that I did was half business and half horse management (1:20)*'. Another told me that she had already graduated from university with a degree other than one related to equestrian studies,

therefore it was a logical choice for her to go back to the higher education environment when she decided to work with horses. She *'wanted to get some qualifications because everyone looks at that and goes 'oh your BHS trained' and people want that qualification behind you even if it's not what you teach.'* (A:40)¹. So she chose to train through an agricultural college to attain her accreditation because of her previous experience at university.

The university environment offers students a choice in their career. Rather than isolating equestrianism to specific tasks they offer courses to augment equestrian skills. As discussed by the next participant who knew the course she wanted was *'Sports Science'*. She chose this course because *'you rode in the degree and you got the opportunity to do the BHS exams alongside the degree. So I had the best of both worlds I could get my Bachelor of Science degree, and get to ride and do my BHS exams'* (2:23).

My final example is a student who teaches horse riding but without the teaching component of her degree. I asked her about coaching without the qualification and she told me *'I just let everyone know I've been taught up to a BHSAI and BHS Intermediate teaching through college but I have never taken any exams'* (A:36). I asked her how she had learnt to coach and was told *'they had me watching lessons and teaching it. We had different lessons from different tutors, and this taught me who I didn't want to be like and who I wanted to be more like. So in the end quite a few tutors I had at college have taught me to be how I am'* (A:36). For this participant working through the courses at college gave her sufficient knowledge and skills to coach without the stress of the final assessment. Attaining a *'National Diploma and Foundation Degree and a Commerce degree in Business in Equine Science and taking my stage 3'* (A:36) gave this participant sufficient knowledge to teach horse riding. In other words she did not hold an equestrian coaching accreditation however, she did have equestrian experience, and this was augmented through her course.

The post-graduates were all equestrians prior to entering university and college. They were all generating an income within the equestrian industry using the skills they had gained from their courses. The assessors were also involved in the equestrian industry and they all generated income through teaching riders and riding horses. However, their comments regarding the university and college systems were less favourable than the students who had studied at them.

¹ The code for this participant indicates A for an alternate syllabus being followed, and the number on my list 1-41.

The assessors' comments regarding accreditation within the university and college systems

An aspect that is detrimental to the universities and colleges with regard to accreditation is that they are producing students who have theoretical knowledge but lack practical skills. Universities and colleges often have their own equine facilities if they do not then they may amalgamate to share facilities or hire them from a local riding school. Equine facilities are necessary to give the practical experience to the students. Even with the facilities students may not necessarily coach paying clients but learn their coaching practice coaching each other. This form of peer learning has the effect of giving confidence, however it is problematic because *'they practice with people who can ride and who respond [correctly]'* (3:27)². Therefore, the feedback that the student gets when coaching a certain skill is not representative of a 'real life' situation, because the horse's response will probably differ.

The assessors considered coaching colleagues to be an unsuccessful way in which to learn to coach equestrian skills. It is evident to the assessors that *'they'd all taught each other. They hadn't actually taught a beginner, because they don't have beginners. They coach each other and they inadvertently are assuming knowledge'* (3:31), which the 'real' beginner will not have. The assessor gave me an example of what was meant. The student was asked to give a first riding lesson to a learner rider. The student failed to notice her pupil had put the wrong foot in the stirrup to mount the horse *'because she was so committed to giving the directions as per her lesson plan'*. The assessor considered that the student had *'learnt it [the lesson] by rote and out it came'*. The assessor had reached this decision because the students she assessed *'all sound the same; they've all got the same lesson, but it is not [always] related to what is happening'* (3:31). The lessons will have some aspects of similarity; similar words or learnt phrases will be used, tried and tested exercises also used however, the coach has to coach according to the responses they are getting from the rider. Although an assessor is not expecting lower level coaches to have extensive knowledge to draw upon, they are expecting them to watch their pupils and be able to coach according to the responses they get from them. The riding teacher needs to be aware of the response to their directions because the horse's input will also affect the results. Failure to notice how the horse is responding can impact on the safety of the rider.

² The code for the participants is as follows: the first number is the level of accreditation; the second number their number on my list 1-41.

The impact of the horse in the riding lesson

Coaching horse riding differs from other sports in that the horse has the ability to mask riding skills. The horse and its responses are different each time it is ridden. Unlike other sports where the coach learns and teaches skills for an inanimate object, such as a bat and ball, which respond the same each time they are hit in a certain way, the horse's response differs each time it is ridden. The desired response is maximised by correct riding skills therefore, (theoretically) the better the rider the better the response from the horse. If coaches are coaching riders who can ride, the coach is being given feedback that is not going to be the same for riders who cannot ride. This is problematic when the coaches qualify and they are expected to coach all levels of riders. If they have only coached their peers their expectations of their pupils' skills will be unrealistic. Students who have only learnt to coach their peers are deemed less able to coach riders from the general public or as stated by the assessors' riders in 'real life' situations.

A further issue surrounding peer coaching in the riding lesson is that assumptions can be made by the teacher with regard to riding skills. The rider's skills may appear to be higher than they are when the rider is riding a well-schooled horse. This means that a less competent rider on a brilliant horse (for a period of time dependent upon the horse) will perform as well as the competent rider on a substandard horse who performs reasonably well. Coaches often ride the horses to ascertain issues, thus the requirement for the riding and coaching component of the accreditation.

I asked the participant who did not hold a teaching qualification who her client base was and she said the *'people whose horses I have corrected for them. That's my trade. So if they've had a horse with an issue that's the people I mainly teach so I keep an eye on how they're progressing, because they know I know the horse and how to teach them to get the best results from the horse.'* (A:36). Equestrian teaching is transference of riding skills into a coaching discourse. Riders learn how to ride the horse, then how to teach others to ride the horse.

Therefore, to attain good coaching skills the equestrian needs to have good riding skills and then learn to teach them. It can be assumed that one's peers on the course, are attaining good riding skills and are reasonable riders. The better the rider the more able they are to deal with

an uncertain response from the horse. Therefore, coaches who are coaching riders who can ride are not experiencing the problems a 'learner rider' has when undertaking their directions.

The assessors argue that equestrian students are learning to coach in an idealistic environment at university and college. They state that the skills they gain may not be transferable when they coach 'real riders' and that '*they would be lost with a group of kids [because] they don't know how to control the ride*' (3.31). Student coaches would possibly lose control of the ride because the horses' response to the riders would not be what the coach expects. Controlling a ride is imperative for safety of all the riders and horses. Exercises that may work when coaching a group of peers may not be successful when coaching learner riders who do not have the skills and knowledge needed to control their horses.

Coaching skills is fundamental to all coaching. However, it is problematic if students have a theoretical knowledge without the practical skills to implement the theories. The sports coaching framework has introduced more theory into the equestrian syllabus some of which may not be as helpful in coaching equestrian skills as in other sports.

The broader sports coaching framework

The sports coaching framework has introduced the concept of assessments as opposed to a final examination. However, Martens, (1990) argues that the fundamental cause of anxiety is when people become uncertain about their abilities or they are trying to please others, which can be seen in the assessment process. Anxiety could be the cause for the student's inabilities during the assessments. Although the assessments are not exams the participants still consider the assessment in the same way they do an exam. When I discussed the assessment process with a post-graduate student I was told that '*it's not how I would necessarily teach it's more for how to teach in the assessment ... because you are so aware of the examiner watching you*' (1:20). Assessments are considered to be a better method of assessing skills because the assessor can discuss the lesson with the student to ensure that specific knowledge has been acquired (Harris, et al., 1995). An assessor told me that if they are not shown a specific skill or given necessary information they can '*tease out the information*' (3.28) from the student.

The two-way communication enhances skills through feedback between the coach and their pupils, however when the coaches pupils are their peers the feedback will be less informative because they can ride. Their experience will differ to a lesser able rider and also '*if your*

friend is being assessed you're not going to say something horrid' (3:31). The assessment is not a real life environment. The horses and riders used are *'carefully chosen to do the job'* (3.31) and therefore the students are teaching for the assessment.

For the broader sports coaching paradigms to be fully implemented in the university and college environments coaching has to be undertaken in a 'real life' environment. Coaches need to put into practice the theory they are learning. If they are expected to reflect on issues to improve their coaching then the issues have to be genuine.

Philosophy and paradigms of the coaching framework within the equestrian industry

The student's inability to implement the theory into practice drew the criticism from the assessors in the study. Students were deemed to be overly theoretical; they had the lesson plan but could not adapt to 'real life' lessons. However, the assessments are not 'real life' situations, the students are under a certain amount of stress to try and produce what is deemed correct for the assessments.

Although the participants viewed coaching peers as negating skills it can be argued that by discussing problems in the group with an experienced coach to guide and therefore can be beneficial (Lincoln, 2008). Problem-based coaching is often used in a theoretical training session with set scenarios that are intended to reflect 'real life' situations (Lincoln, 2008). The benefits for working with one's peers is that some students will be encouraged to gain skills through peer persuasion (Burns, 2002), that is they will become motivated by watching and listening to their peers (Martens, 1990). Coaching that is learned by working with peer groups produces theoretical coaching, which then needs to be implemented into practice with riders other than the group.

Martens (1997) argues that coaches learn their skills through trial and error. If coaches are not getting 'real life' coaching experiences then what they coach is not indicative of the workplace and *'the upshot of it is the industry, quite understandably, have an allergic rash against college students because they're not really tried and tested'* (1:39³). I discussed why college and university students were not 'tried and tested' and I was told that one reason is that those working within the colleges and universities are often recruited from within the

³ Although this participant only held the first accreditation she had ten years' experience as head of a department in a college and had been a BHS inspector.

system. This is problematic because *'we've got to the stage where we've got people going back to work in colleges who have done all their training in colleges they've no genuine experience of coaching real people'* (3:31). The result is that often industry is no longer concerned with the accreditation much preferring employees to have experience they ask *'what competitions have you done or which competition rider have you worked for? Not what paper work have you got ... it is much more reliable than the certificate'* (E:3:35)⁴. If the data is representative of a larger cohort then this is challenging for an industry that is trying to make accreditation for coaching riding compulsory in the future and for the coaching environments and coaching accreditations that are devised to create graduates capable of working in industry.

The BHS accreditation system is designed to create accredited equestrians who have gained a three tiered qualification: riding, horse-management the teaching in which to gain each level of accreditation. When I discussed the timeframe for the BHS levels I was told the BHS system was designed for students to gain their BHSAI at the riding schools and then *'go out for a couple of years and work in industry teaching different people working in different areas then come back and do your intermediate (BHSII)'* (3:31), which is not the perception of the universities and colleges work who seem to rush the students through the courses with or without *'real life'* equestrian coaching experience.

The assessors acknowledged that there were good colleges producing good students but the students who did well from the college and university systems were those who *'already have a good horsey background, certainly gone in there with a lot of information. The people who go in at the lower levels come out pretty useless in employment and you wouldn't really want to employ them'*. (E:3:35).

Discussion

The student examples did not exemplify the assessors' assessment of the university and college graduates. The participants in the study who had graduated through the university and college programmes all worked in industry as equestrian coaches. However, they all went into the establishments from a *'horsey'* background, which may have influenced the outcome as was suggested.

⁴ The code for this participant indicates E for elite rider, third level accreditation and 35th on my list 1-41.

The assessment process being undertaken is criterion-referenced assessment, which measures performance judged on a previously specified standard (Connoley, 2004). When the students failed to reach the standard set by the assessors it was considered to be due to them learning to coach by coaching their peers. Peer coaching relies on sound knowledge transference. The student needs to be able to transfer what has been learned in the simulated lesson into a 'real' riding lesson. Coaching one's peers has the capacity to implement the coaching philosophies, for example it can give students the confidence to coach a subject in which they learn how to: plan and progress the lessons, implement and discuss goals, and give and receive feedback that they can reflect upon and discuss. The issue with peer coaching is that one's peers may not react to the coaching as a novice rider would because they already have the skills being taught. Therefore coaching one's peers should not take the place of coaching in a 'real life' environment. Students need to be encouraged to acquire deep rather than a superficial approach to their teaching (Biggs, 1989). The environment needs to be 'real' so that students are not interpreting the coaching philosophy in the context of meeting the demands of the teacher and the course but also as a reflection of correct coaching (Biggs, 1989).

Although the assessors should be unbiased, their judgments are subjective; assessment therefore raises ethical questions (Harris, et al., 1995) and as such perhaps more consideration of the assessment process is required. Assessment should determine educational and training needs (Harris, et al., 1995) and the paper has helped identify training and educational needs, which could become the focus for further research.

Although the pathways to the accreditation are flexible the end has to be measurable (Harris, et al., 1995) and this is through the assessment of skills. If I concede that the assessment process is defensible and valid (Harris, et al., 1995), then the paper has indicated that there are areas of concern with regard to the standard of equestrian students coming through the higher education establishments. This implies that the alignment between the objectives of the syllabus and assessment criteria is not always reached.

Burns (2002) states that a university and college degree can be considered important and relevant, or wrong and wasteful dependent on your perspective although the assessors did not necessarily agree with the former statement the data did indicate that there is relevance in Equestrian Science. This is not to say that the universities and colleges have necessarily got

it right with regard to producing equestrian coaches and the issues raised in the paper are worthy of consideration.

Conclusion

The BHS has created a syllabus suited to modern riders and coaches by introducing sports coaching philosophies and paradigms. It is now the responsibility of the universities and colleges to ensure that students are of the standard required for the assessments if the assessment process is to work effectively (Biggs, 2003). The syllabus needs to be explained so that students understand the criteria being assessed (Connoley, 2004). The students also need to practice in 'real life' settings. For example if the lesson is a beginner lesson then the student needs to ensure that they can coach beginners. If the university or college does not have the facilities to do this then they need to access other areas for their students to attain experience in a 'real life' riding lesson. By doing this the university and colleges may then fulfil the expectations of industry through their Equine Science courses and produce students who are at the forefront of knowledge and research.

Although the broader coaching framework was in evidence, understanding the theories behind the concepts were not. Some of the assessors in the study did not understand the value of peer learning and some of the post-graduates in the study did not consider the assessment as anything other than an exam. The findings did suggest that by offering courses at universities and colleges' potential coaches can adopt a multidisciplinary approach to equestrianism. The data is polarised between the post-graduates, who are all attaining an income within the equestrian industry and the assessors who dispute graduate skills when completing their courses. The difference may be due to the post-graduates in the study all having prior equestrian knowledge before attaining their accreditation. The fact that they have all pursued coaching as part of their equestrian career indicates the need for universities and colleges to create coaching practice in real life environments.

The BHS syllabus is based upon the requirements of industry and these requirements should be primary concerns when producing equestrian graduates. Therefore, universities and colleges should consider their programmes of study to ensure that both theory and practice

are maximised to create an equestrian student who is fully equipped to coach horse riding in real life environments.

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Appendix i

Some of the equestrian courses available in the universities and colleges

- NVQ Levels 1,2 & 3, Diploma's in Horse Care/Horse Studies
- Business and Technology Education Council (BETC)
- National Certificate in Horse Management/Studies
- BTEC National Diploma in Horse Management/Horse Studies
- Higher National Dip (HND)
- Equine Science HND
- Equine Business Management, Foundation Degree in Equine Business Management
- Equine Sports Science, Equine Studies; BSc (Hons) in Equine Business Management
Equine Dental Science or Equine Science
- MSc in Equine Science, RCVS Certificate in Equine Veterinary Nursing.

(www.hartpury.ac.uk)

Appendix ii

Level 2 for the UKCC is equivalent to the BHSAI

Level 3 for the UKCC is equivalent to the BHSII

Level 4 for the UKCC is equivalent to the BHSI

(www.bhs.co.uk)

The key to the accreditation table: United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC), The British Horse Society Assistant Instructor (BHSAI), The British Horse Society Intermediate Instructor (BHSII), The British Horse Society Instructor (BHSI). I have based my assessment of the 3 levels of coaching accreditations following the International Group for Equestrian Qualifications (www.bhs.co.uk)

Appendix iii

Questions for the participants to be discussed

1. To begin with can you tell me about your background as a rider and where your career has taken you?
2. What was and is your experience of being taught to ride?
3. What do you remember about your experiences training to coach riding?
4. So now let's talk some more about your relationship between riding and coaching. Consider what you think are the key elements of a good riding lesson.
5. Looking back, do you think your riding instruction has changed over time and if so how?
6. What are your goals when coaching?
7. Anything else you would like to say that may be important to the research?

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