

# The Island of Competence: Coaching When Judgement and Shame is Present

**Philippa van Kuilenburg**

*Philippa is a contractor and group worker based in Auckland, New Zealand providing a mentoring and training service. This paper is adapted from her thesis "Use of Role Training as a Coaching Method."*

In this article I present a case study and a coaching framework based on the theories of Moreno and Vygotsky, an educationalist. My hypothesis is that effective coaching focuses on the emergent progressive roles before addressing developmental areas and results in the learner integrating and sustaining progressive functioning. A learner often assesses his or her progress inaccurately by using experts in the form of more experienced practitioners as the benchmark. The central idea is that coaching relationships with a primary focus on what is wrong, rather than what is being developed warm a learner up to inadequacy, inhibiting development of progressive functioning and role repertoire expansion.

## **Sam**

In my role as tutor and counsellor for an early childhood teaching college, Sam comes to me for assistance after receiving a poor performance review.

Sam presents herself as a vibrant young woman. She is friendly but at times insecure and sharp in her responses. Her performance review with her manager has highlighted a need for change or face a potential loss of job. Performance reviews by students and colleagues have shown her as threatening, cold and indifferent as well naming times when Sam is able to be loving and supportive.

Sam finds responding to students with challenging behaviours difficult and warms up to her own inadequacy. She knows that when in relationship with managers, who are in authority, she cannot behave the same way as she did as a rebellious teenager. Yet she finds herself arguing and being difficult. The resulting internal conflict in Sam has resulted in her becoming immobilised, silent and unable to function.

Sam admires my ability to assist student teachers to learn new behaviours and wants me to help her to do the same. Her goal is to have the students say, "how easy Sam is to approach and she understands our problems."

After initial contract setting, I invite Sam set out a typical interaction with students using objects placed on the floor. In setting the scene, Sam warms up to her system and the individuals that are present. I ask Sam to take up each role in quick succession and interview her to establish what their relationship is with Sam. Role reversal assists Sam to warm up to herself, increase spontaneity and develop new awareness.

In setting out the relationships (Diagram 1), Sam warms up to the feelings she has towards her immediate manager, the College Training Manager, and the Managing Director.

She brings out the difficulty she experiences in dealing with what she perceives as their authoritarian manner. She sees them as being harsh and judgmental. The managers attempt to help Sam by pointing out what she is doing wrong but find her either closed, resisting their assistance or defiant when they point out what is occurring.

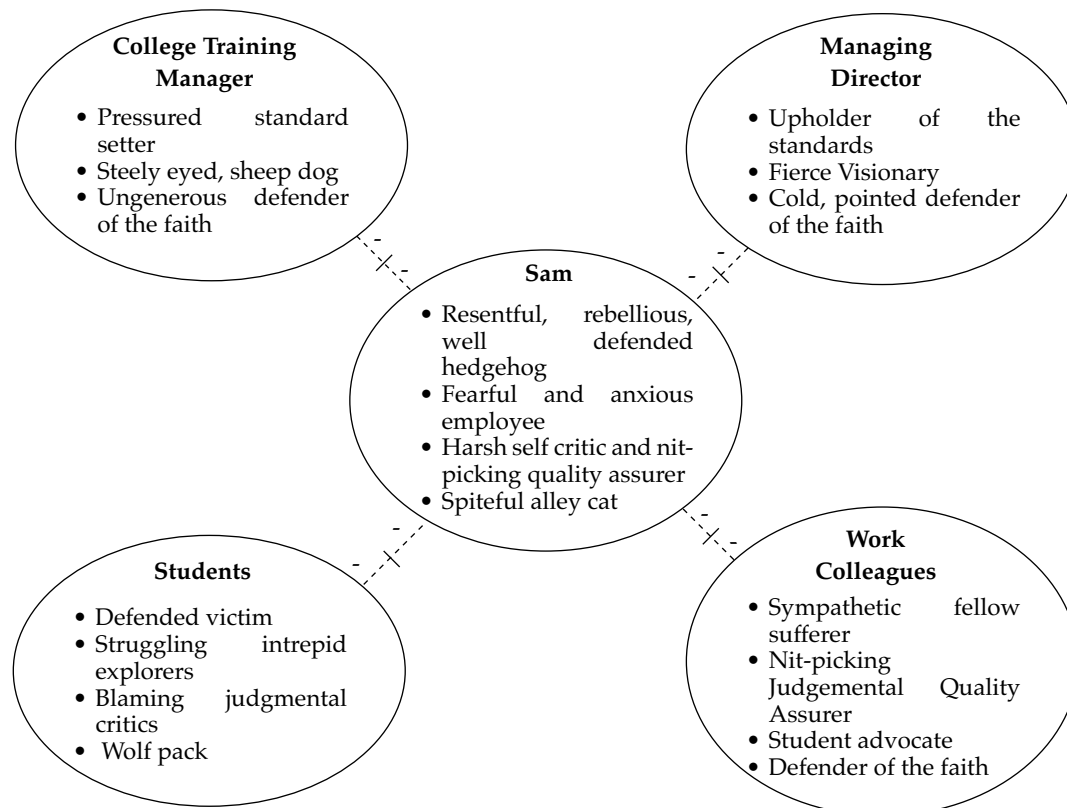
The students do not enjoy her as a teacher and mentor as she is hard, punishing, and quick to find fault cutting off discussion. Sam responds by saying they need to grow up, to stop arguing and do what they are told to do. She is also aware that other tutors are critical of her behaviour.

I ask Sam to step out and observe what she has set out. Sam comments that whenever she is challenged in some way, she feels she is failing or losing, and she begins to think about how she can escape. When she feels powerless, she

warms up to being hard and ready to fight. The end-of-course evaluation has highlighted this behaviour.

She is increasingly aware of an all-too-familiar feeling of wanting to fight and argue because she does not feel understood or heard. She knows that this is not appropriate and so has become quiet, resentful and, feels powerless. Her sense of being competent disappears. She warms up to the role of the *Nit-picking Judgmental Quality Assurer* and engages in a lot of negative self-talk. When I ask what she feels she does adequately (her 'island of competence'), Sam is unable to identify anything positive. Sam states that she feels unseen and misunderstood. As her anxiety increases she wants to run away as she did in the past when she moved to another country. Her thoughts of escape now take form with the contemplation of suicide.

**Diagram 1: Sam's Workplace Social System**



My analysis of Sam's role system is that it is shame-based. The focus is on what is wrong and attempts to correct the person and not the behaviour. It works from the belief that "you learn best when you know what is wrong and therefore you can fix it".

### Coaching for Learning

When assessing trainee early childhood teachers, I have discovered that as learners they are unable to assess themselves appropriately. They cannot name what went well or feel good about that small piece. They are only aware of what went wrong and hence, in their self assessment, throw the baby out with the bath water. On exploring what they were aware of, I discovered they were comparing themselves with more experienced teachers. They were focusing on what is well developed in others and forgot that it takes time, experimentation and practice to reach that spot. I name this as the learner warming up to the role of *Nit-picking Judgmental Quality Assurer*. In this role they begin to judge themselves harshly and warm up to a range of feelings from shame and doubt to inadequacy.

In searching for a way to change this thinking, I drew on Moreno's role theory and modified Lev Vygotsky's theory that learners require support and challenge as they learn (see Dabbagh 1999). The challenge is to sufficiently stretch the learner's thinking or skill but not so much that it sets them up to fail. Vygotsky's notion is that application processes do not coincide with learning processes. Rather, the application lags behind the learning process resulting in what he calls 'zones of proximal development'. There is a gap between understanding and application. It is essential the learner does not make competency judgements beyond the proximal zone.

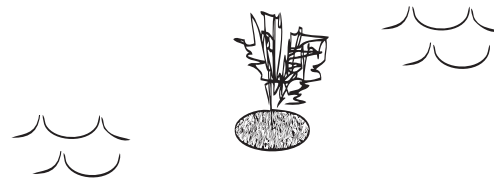
This model is expressed in educational terms, as that was the context in which I was working at the time. As it made sense to the learner it soon became part of the coaching contract.

There are two parts to this process, i) assisting the learner understand and self assess appropriately; ii) the process of coaching itself.

### The Model

With coaching clients I first introduce the metaphor of 'the island of competence' (Diagram 2). This island represents the area of knowledge and skill that the individual feels okay about. It may be either big or small depending on the context of the situation, and self-esteem.

Diagram 2: The Island of Competence



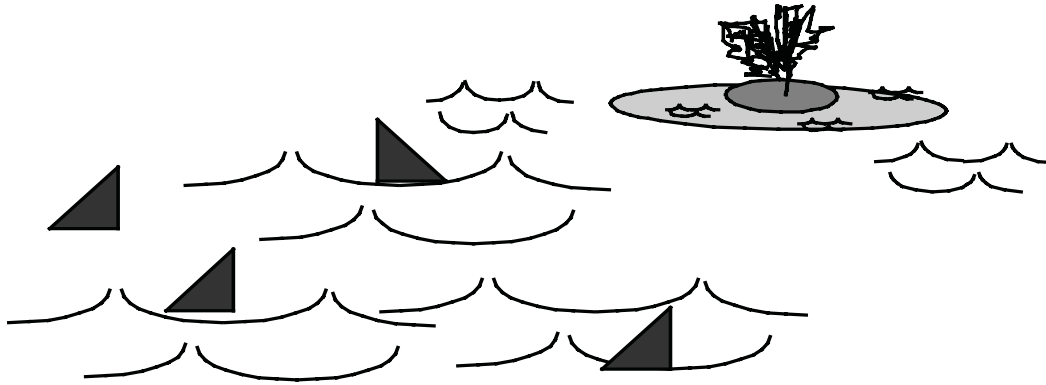
Then I talk about the shallow water surrounding the island (Diagram 3), the area Vygotsky calls the 'zone of proximal development' where there is a gap between knowledge and skill implementation based on current experience. I explain that this is the area they are currently learning and experimenting within. In Morenian terms it is the area of role development, role taking and integration. It is this area where coaches encourage and challenge the learner. It is the only legitimate area the learner and coach can assess within. It is the only area I want them to assess their development and current practice within.

Diagram 3: The Shallow Water



Finally, I talk about the area of deep water (Diagram 4). I ask the learner what lies out in the deep water, and when they see the fins, they identify the sharks and that sharks cause damage. In this area they warm up to being fearful.

Diagram 4: The Deep Water



When learners are warmed up in this way they tend to discount changes in their behaviour and do not value the small but steady changes that indicate growth. Their attention is instead focused on what cannot be done. This imbalance results in the learner being anxious when being assessed. When warmed up to the role of *Anxious Learner*, they find it difficult to be willing to experiment and be curious. Instead they warm up to safety and limiting solutions. In the long term, this will not assist the learner to achieve his or her goal and a new warm-up has to be developed before quality learning and new behaviours can be achieved.

When the learners assess themselves out here in the deep water, they are comparing themselves as a novice with an expert. They start with the expectation that as a learner and novice they can immediately do what the expert can do. This results in possible emotional and psychological dysfunction of doubt and shame, "I'm not OK or I am not good enough," and "I'll never get it right" is likely to result. I discourage them from comparing themselves (a novice) with a more experienced practitioner. This is the role of the *Nit-picking Judgmental Quality Assurer* and I will stop and challenge them. I am not interested in supporting them doing harm to themselves. I more interested in coaching them to develop what is a legitimate area of development - in the shallow water.

The desire for growth and development (motivating force) is in conflict with fear of exposure, anxiety and shame (reactive fear). As Max Clayton says, "Anxiety is the hobgoblin of spontaneity." It is only later, when there is sufficient spontaneity that progressive role development occurs.

My aim is to provide Sam with a friendly supportive climate that promotes her development. My hypothesis is that Sam tends to focus on a level of skill that is currently beyond the capability of her students. In my sessions with Sam I warm up to being friendly towards her. I do this by thinking about her as an 'open and caring learner'.

### Recreating an Earlier System

In a subsequent session we again observe the system Sam has set out. I notice that Sam appears warmed up to something else. Sam talks about the difficult relationship she has with her mother. I invite Sam to set out her family system alongside the work system. Sam quickly recognises that the relationship she has with her managers is a re-creation of the one she has with her mother and experiences the same anxiety. At this point in time Sam still does not have sufficient spontaneity to warm up to new roles. Her coping mechanism is to act quiet and withdrawn but feel rebellious and hard done by, enhancing her feelings of "not being good enough."

As Sam places her mother behind her managers, she reflects on the similarity between herself as teenager with mother and now with her students. Like her mother, Sam attempts to control undesirable behaviour and feelings of powerlessness by focusing on what is wrong or being cold, dismissive and authoritarian. The outcome is a constant message to the students, "you are not okay and please change." Sam and I consider her system, and note that her family of origin, students and managers elicit the same dynamic. My job as coach is to keep her in the shallow water, focused on valuing what she is developing in herself, what is adequate and what is realistic 'for now'.

Sam wants to lash out at the students and work colleagues when she experiences them in return as being critical, judgmental and non-accepting. She acts punishingly towards the students and argues with her peers and managers. Sam recognises that she warms up to resentment and anger when experiences rejection by others, and so do her learners.

I direct Sam to role reverse around the family system, in order to assist her to continue to warm up to herself. As Sam warms up in the role of Father she finds that he is struggling to deal with his wife's approach but does not know how to help Sam. He is conflicted as he

feels he must support his wife.

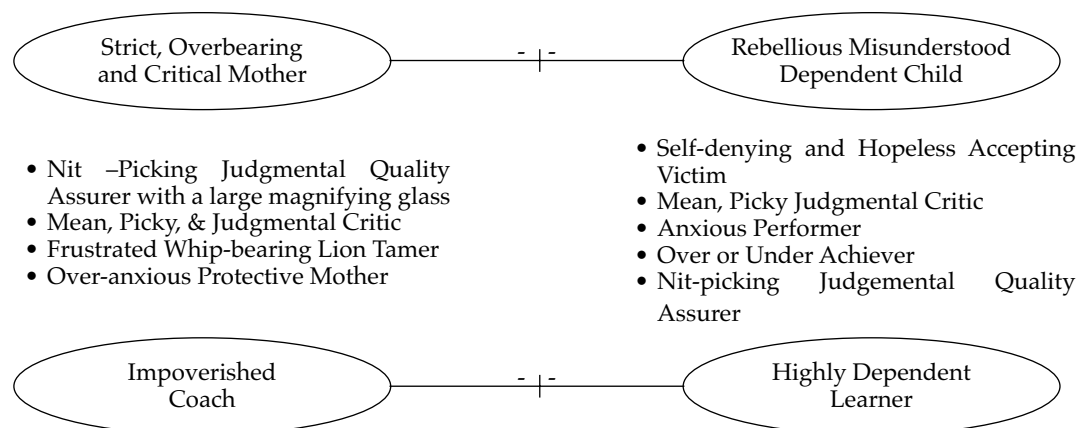
I invite Sam to step outside of the interaction, and interview her on what she observes. This places Sam in the role of *Wise Guide*. Sam comments that she goes to Dad to talk about her problems and she feels he at least listens but knows that he will support his wife. She sees herself in conflict with both parents but feels warmer to Dad than she is towards her mother. Sam observes her behaviour in a loving and non-judgemental manner and further integrates the role of the *Loving Non-judgmental Observer*. She is staying in the area of the shallow water.

We discuss what has been discovered so far. Understanding who is in the system and what positive resources are available to the protagonist are important to both coach and learner. The increased awareness and warm-up to the positive aspects assist the development of spontaneity. As we do this, Sam warms up to the role of the *Self-directed Learner*. She is engaging in the analysis and assessment of her development as a co-creator.

### A Coach's Perspective

As coach I make a link between her role relationship with her mother and the role relationship with her managers (Diagram 5). This is centred around her role as a learner.

**Diagram 5: Sam's Learner Role System**



In such a system learning is painful, due to anxiety, and shame. Dependency is created on the coach. The learner is unwilling or unable to trust his or her judgement and value his or her process. There are very low levels of spontaneity.

### **Arguing Equals Power**

Sam acknowledges that as she locks horns with her mother she feels a greater sense of power, as she is aware at some level her mother is frustrated. She states, "When I argue, I feel heard and alive. Arguing with Mum equals power and feeling alive. Really I am arguing with the unresolved relationships I have with my parents, primarily my mother." Although this results in some gains for Sam, she is not happy about the long-term consequences. She needs to be in charge, to make the decisions. When she is not in charge, she feels powerless, creating a high level of distress.

I ask Sam to consider what impact the coping strategies that she developed with her mother are having in her current situation. She comments that she perceives her managers in the same way as she perceives her mother. The coping behaviours create problems within her work situation. Here, she has moved into conserved defensive roles, becoming a subservient underling and resentful child. This results in fearfulness and evasiveness towards her managers. Her feelings towards her students are of increasing resentment, shame and anger and frequently become a spiteful alley cat towards them. I name the coping roles of '*Anxious and Defiant Street Fighter*' and '*Argumentative Debater*' that allow Sam to feel more visible and put herself on the map. These roles emerge to counter the fragmenting roles of '*The Invisible Person*' and '*Powerless Leader*'.

I ask Sam what would be the ideal situation? She tells me that she wants "them to develop a more mature way of dealing with feedback and assessment of their growth as early childhood teachers." What she currently experiences is resentment, argument or silent resistance. I feel

encouraged at this point, and feel that this is an important point in her development. I mirror back my encouragement by reflecting on the importance of her emerging awareness. It is a solid place (the island of competence) to build on.

### **Death as a Solution**

Sam talks about taking her own life whenever she warms up to the fragmenting roles as a possible solution to the problem of being totally invisible and feeling that nobody will listen to her or acknowledge her needs. I worry about this, as Sam has made more than one reference to death. This is an example of an imbalance of fragmenting role clusters, thus creating a delay in the emergence of loving self. It is an expression of Sam's pain, fragmentation and dysfunction and is a restrictive solution.

I know that Sam wants to change and take more responsibility for her behaviour. She knows she needs to develop other roles to deal with authority and to coach her students. As a coach, I am aware of the importance of accepting her statements and giving value to them. I am concerned about the numerous references to death as a solution. They are expressed with strength of voice and congruency of body that tell me they are not idle thoughts. I decide that Sam has developed some very valuable insights into what was contributing to her current behaviour. It is a positive place to build upon and to begin exploring the contributing factors to the expressed despair. The focus on death is restrictive and potentially dangerous and I would be negligent if I ignored it. I make the decision that role training will not adequately facilitate the development of progressive roles at this point. I feel it is necessary to step out of the role of role trainer and think as a clinician. I take my authority and suggest to Sam that she see me on a one-to-one basis outside of my role of workplace coach. She accepts.

### **Social Atom Repair**

Based on what Sam has presented, I put to her that the difficulty with her mother in an earlier

age is continuing to influence her present abilities to develop new roles. I believe that Sam would benefit by looking at what this may be. At this point, I am working as a therapeutic guide to facilitate social atom repair.

Sam sets out her grandmother's funeral. I encourage her to warm up to herself as she was at the time. As she does this, she warms up to her frustration and despair. Sam wants to view her grandmother's body, to touch her and say goodbye but is denied the opportunity. When enacting the role of Mother she talks about her desire to protect her daughter and does not realise it has caused her so much pain and how it alienates Sam. I direct Sam to warm up to grandmother and she begins by telling her about her distress in not being able to say goodbye. In the drama it is now time to do so and release her. Sam is then able to turn to her mother and, with coaching, forgive her for not understanding. I am working hard at this point to ensure there is completion. I am anxious about ensuring that Sam finds some resolution with her mother, as I feel it is a key factor to Sam being able to develop a progressive solution.

Returning to the original scene with Sam's managers, I encourage Sam to speak directly and honestly about what she is feeling. Sam begins to articulate what she feels when she is in relationship with her manager, with my encouragement. In the counter role of manager, Sam is viewed in a more positive light and a greater willingness is expressed to help her. Sam feels heard and acknowledged. Sam finishes the session stating she feels more hopeful and has lightness in her body that was not there before.

### **Acting Consciously**

Sam works on her relationships at work and with her parents, integrating what she knows and what she can do. Sam consciously takes responsibility for her decisions and choices in life without blaming others. She begins to deal with her fears and recognises when she fragments. She makes new choices about the way she chooses to act in the moment rather

than react in old conserved roles. Changes do not happen quickly and she requires follow-up support over several weeks.

Students start to come to her for help and express in feedback sheets that she is up front and honest and supportive. Sam's contract for employment is renewed; her relationship with her boss is now one of full support and at ease. Work has become easier and enjoyable.

### **No-one Persuades Another To Change**

My work as a coach has led me to the firm conviction that coaches and learners are co-creators of the journey. Traditional teaching methods of "telling the learner what to think, feel and do", in the long term, create dependency. If the focus is only on what is wrong or not adequate, then learners warm up to fragmentation and coping roles.

A coach must appreciate that a learner cannot be persuaded to learn things that a coach perceives as desirable by forcing them to change. *"A belated discovery, one that causes considerable anguish, is that no-one persuades another to change. Each of us guards a gate of change that can only be unlocked from the inside. We cannot open the gate of another, either by argument or by emotional appeal."* (Ferguson 1980:119)

In essence the coach's role is to:

- Encourage a learner to be a full partner in the process and to take responsibility in all aspects of the learning journey
- Create an environment where a learner feels free to experiment and explore
- Encourage a sense of confidence and belief in a learner to trust self
- Value what has been successful or useful and spend time ensuring this aspect has been fully appreciated.
- Celebrate success before focusing on developmental areas

Effective coaching requires a primary focus on the emerging roles. This approach is more

successful in assisting the learner increase spontaneity and integration of new roles. Such coaches have an understanding that new knowledge or skill takes time before there is full integration and expression. Hence the coach warms the learner up to assessing what is appropriate in the learner's current stage of development and directs them away from the sharks that maintain inadequacy and inhibit development of progressive functioning and role repertoire expansion.

Names have been changed to protect the client. Philippa van Kuilenburg can be contacted at <trainingenergy@xtra.co.nz>

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