Can low-cost support programmes with coaching accelerate doctoral completion in Health Science Faculty academics?

HILARY GEBER
University of the Witwatersrand

ALISON BENTLEY
University of the Witwatersrand

Career development for full-time Health Sciences academics through to doctoral studies is a monumental task. Many academics have difficulty completing their studies in the minimum time as well as publishing after obtaining their degree. As this problem is particularly acute in the Health Sciences, the PhD Acceleration Programme in Health Sciences was piloted in 2009 by the Faculty of Health Science Research Office at the University of the Witwatersrand to provide deliberate support to staff members registered for a PhD to attain their goals. There is little research on such interventions using coaching and coaching-learning. This article discusses the programme structure, participants' evaluation of the year-long intervention and some longitudinal data, using semi-structured interviews in a qualitative paradigm. The findings indicate that staff found the research writing course the most valuable of the skills courses and noted that the individual, goal-directed coaching helped them in many different ways in completing the thesis and managing their professional lives simultaneously. This structured support programme with coaching provides a low-cost, sustainable innovation for full-time academics during doctoral studies.

Keywords: full-time academics, sustainable, innovative support, research publications, postgraduate degrees, accelerated completion, individual coaching, goal-directed coaching, coaching-learning

Introduction

The Academy of Sciences South Africa reports that the number of full-time academics with doctoral degrees constitutes less than 45% of the total staff component at all South African higher education institutions (ASSAF 2010). This limits the number of doctoral students who can be supervised and examined by the institution. Every staff member who is able to complete a PhD increases the number of PhD students that can be registered and graduated by the institution.

At the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) the potential for supervision is particularly problematic at the lecturer level. While 77% of senior academics have PhDs, the number of lecturers with PhDs is 24%, with many currently registered for a PhD. Between 50% and 60% of PhD students in the first four years of study throughout South Africa are fully employed (ASSAF 2010), many of them as lecturers in higher education institutions. Across the country, Faculties of Health Sciences are most compromised in the area of academic staff holding PhDs, as only 8% of staff members have a PhD (ASSAF 2010). At Wits the number of Faculty of Health Sciences academics holding PhDs is better, but still not adequate, at 43%.

The low number of staff in Health Sciences with PhDs is partly due to the nature of their work. While other lecturers are employed solely by their institutions, many Health Sciences academics are joint staff with the Provincial Departments of Health as their primary employer. They are thus employed full-time to treat patients in addition to the usual teaching, administration and research components of academic life. Even for those not employed for clinical duties the teaching load is particularly onerous because the teaching year extends over a longer period than for the rest of the University with students on campus from early January to early December, leaving little 'research' time. The contribution of the workload to non-timely completion of the PhD was confirmed by the ASSAF (2010) report, listing the difficulty in balancing work, family, study and social activities and a lack of institutional support in the top four negative themes reported by doctoral candidates. Adding the extra time required to complete a

PhD to this already time-intensive workload increases the stress on academics. Because time is short, academics may concentrate on those activities which are easier, have more urgent deadlines and more tangible outcomes, such as teaching and administration, rather than the years of difficult intellectual work required to complete a PhD.

Two other factors have an impact on the problems of staff members in Health Sciences registered for PhDs. Graduates with an MBBCh are considered to have an MSc equivalent and can embark on a PhD without any previous research experience. Also, owing to the high number of PhD graduates required by medical schools, the cost of improving the throughput of staff members with a PhD needs to be kept relatively low.

What is needed is a low-cost sustainable programme to assist staff members registered for a PhD complete the degree. Wits implemented such a programme for higher degree candidates in 2007 and a pilot programme for staff members in the Faculty of Health Sciences was launched in 2009. This paper discusses the results of the pilot programme in the Faculty of Health Sciences.

Literature review

Adult learning in coaching

From the early adult learning theories such as those by Lewin (1951), and Kolb's (1984) cycle of learning, a goal-directed approach to learning is often suggested. A goal-directed approach with a clear commitment to action is also one of the central themes of the coaching process (Grant, 2003). Goal-directed self-regulation consists of a series of processes in which an individual sets a goal, develops a plan of action, begins the action, monitors and evaluates performance and, based on this evaluation, changes the actions to reach the set goals (Grant, 2003 in figure 1). The coach's role is to facilitate individual/coachee movement through the self-regulatory cycle towards goal attainment. The connection between learning and coaching was originally proposed by Hurd (2002), with the addition of transformational learning by Hargrove (2003). The phases of Mezirow's model of transformation (2000) closely align to the processes involved in coaching. While the theoretical background for coaching alone has not been well studied, Griffiths (2005) proposes a model of effective learning within personal coaching, as described by Grant (2003). Griffiths' coaching-learning model (2005), which combines adult learning theory and transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000) with coaching theory (Grant, 2003), is the conceptual model on which this study is based.

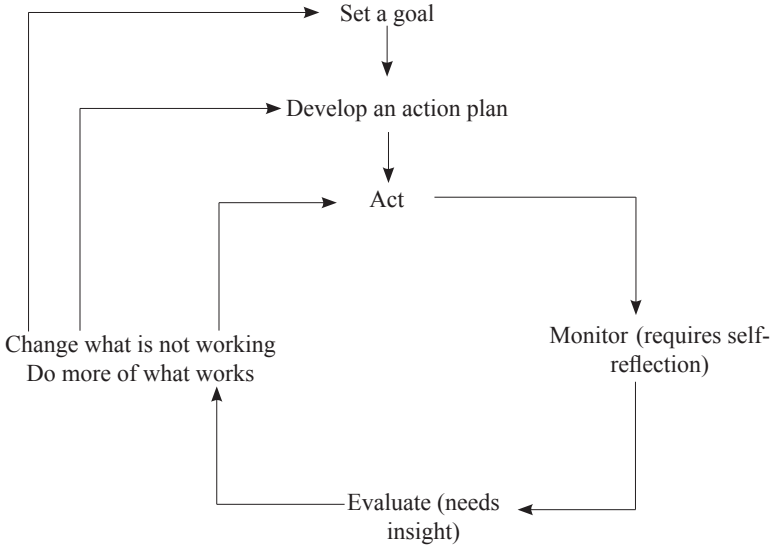

Figure 1: Generic model of self-regulation and goal attainment showing self-reflection and insight.
Source: Grant, 2003.

Coaching postgraduates

Grant (2003) maintains that coaching is effective in goal attainment and in reducing anxiety and stress. In his study on mature postgraduate candidates, participation in the coaching programme was associated with increased goal attainment, significantly reduced levels of depression, anxiety and stress, and significantly enhanced quality of life and levels of insight. In South Africa, doctoral studies are frequently undertaken as an individual research model where the candidate has very little interaction with people outside of the supervisor relationship (Backhouse, 2010). While the supervisor may sometimes be able to address all the candidate's needs, this is not often the case. Very few studies have been done on the usefulness of individual, goal-specific coaching in the attainment of postgraduate learning and completion of postgraduate degrees.

Coaches are not the same as mentors or postgraduate supervisors. The doctoral supervisor has a clear agenda to provide guidance on the completion of the degree, while mentoring, as seen by De Janasz and Sullivan (2004), is designed to enhance three forms of career competencies: in consolidating professional identities, in knowledge and skills, and in networking and relationships. They suggest that young professionals benefit most from having several mentors to assist in their growth and development. The supervisory relationship lasts as long as it takes to complete the research and the mentoring relationship may last many years, while the individual coaching relationship is usually of shorter duration and goal focused.

Coaching, and particularly the use of internal coaches, is increasingly popular in institutions where there is an ongoing need for support of staff. Frisch (2001) defines internal coaching as: "a one-to-one developmental intervention supported by the organisation and provided by a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a programme yielding individual professional growth". The internal coach fulfils a role outside line management, and distinct from the line manager, Head of School, head of department or discipline, and higher degree supervisor in higher education institutions. Internal coaching also implies that a whole programme of coaching sessions is undertaken and the intervention is not restricted to a single informal discussion. The internal coach also knows about academic or research roles in departments or schools, and they have extensive awareness of organisational culture, academic and publication pressures, frustrations, leadership challenges, and anticipated change, which significantly adds to the immediacy and value of their support. This internal knowledge of coaches is important in the context of this proposed doctoral support programme because the coach understands the demands of the teaching load and administrative duties as well as the imperative to conduct research and gain more advanced qualifications in the Faculty of Health Sciences.

Coaching also provides a sustainable and cost effective strategy for faculty support. Coaches need to be trained, but do not need to be discipline experts or chosen from any particular faculty. They need not be psychologists or counselors; scientists and engineers also make good coaches (Geber, 2010). One coach can coach a number of colleagues per year from any faculty which provides sustainability and cost-effectiveness for the programme. While measures such as taking a 'time-off sabbatical' may help in obtaining a PhD, coaching the full-time academic to continue with research writing while taking care of their usual workload enables them to become truly productive academic writers.

Background to the PhD Acceleration Programme

Although supervision and mentoring are available to staff members, coaching was not previously available for those completing postgraduate degrees. Wits implemented a structured support pilot programme for staff members doing postgraduate research in 2007 (Geber 2009). The programme design included individual coaching and specific skills training, including courses on research writing skills; voice and presentation skills; effective speed reading; time and stress management; and writing National Research Foundation funding proposals. The coaching consisted of 10-12 individual coaching sessions over a period of one year with coaches of the participant's choice.

The participants in a previous pilot programme (Geber, 2009) reported that the Research Writing course was the most valuable of the skills courses. Without exception, all participants said that their coaching was invaluable and that their coaches were instrumental in helping them achieve their goals (Geber, 2010). Goal setting and goal alignment, and support in goal achievement were the primary

intentions of the coaching. The coaching also had much wider effects such as personal development, exploring areas directly linked to the research and writing process, work/life balance, interpersonal skills, communication, assertiveness and dealing with criticism, and managing departmental politics.

The success of the pilot programme encouraged the Faculty of Health Sciences, through the Health Sciences Research Office, to launch their PhD Acceleration Programme in 2009 with the same mainstream support structure for full-time staff two years into a PhD degree. Our objectives were to determine whether this low-cost, structured coaching-learning programme assisted full-time Health Sciences academics to complete their PhDs and what aspects of the structured programme were most beneficial. A secondary objective was to determine whether the cost of coaching would be worthwhile for the institution in the long run.

Training of internal coaches at Wits

For the Faculty of Health Sciences programme, four Wits permanent staff members, with discipline expertise in health education, psychology and information technology, and who had previously trained as professional coaches, were selected. The Co-active Coaching Model was used to train coaches to help clients, through a series of questions and accountability agreements, to achieve the goals that the clients set. The Co-active Coach Training Programme curriculum involves 124 hours of intensive face-to-face training with a great deal of practicing on real people and issues. (Further information is available at: http://www.thecoaches.co.za/index.htm.) The initial cost of training the four coaches was ZAR93 000 for 15 days training over six months. There was no charge for coaching sessions for participants because the internal coaches were required to coach without charge as repayment to the University for their training.

Duration of coaching

Participants were paired with coaches of their choice and offered 10-12 coaching sessions over a period of a year, during which most of them spent between 15 and 20 hours in coaching.

Skills courses

Participants were given a list of courses offered by the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development to attend during the year. In order to keep the costs low and the programme sustainable only those courses already provided to University staff members in general were offered. The total cost for external trainers in the skills training courses was ZAR20 000 for all the participants.

Methodology

This is a qualitative interpretative study of the structured support programme for selected staff members registered for a PhD in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Wits and how it facilitated doctoral degree completion. The four participants were used to obtain intensive, rich and in-depth data about the relationships as described by Patton (1990), who suggests using few, information-rich cases in order to learn a great deal about concerns central to the purpose of the research. Participants agreed in writing to allow their open-ended questionnaire data and semi-structured interviews to be used in the research study for which an ethics waiver was obtained from the University Research Office.

Sample

This is a purposive sample as only academics in full-time employment in Health Sciences who had been registered for PhDs for two years were selected by the Assistant Dean for Research and Postgraduate Activities. Four PhD candidates attended an initial meeting, were paired with coaches and advised of the courses for the year. Two African men, one Indian woman and one

White woman participated: a medical clinician, an allied medical therapist and two from scientific backgrounds.

Data collection

A series of questionnaires requiring written prose responses by participants was used to obtain data before and after the programme. Participants completed questionnaires about their experience of the programme and the coaching, the effectiveness of the courses and coaching sessions, what research outcomes they achieved and any additional comments.

Data analysis

The data was analysed and categorised according to the themes which emerged. Five themes emerged and are discussed in the following section.

Findings

The findings from the data are described in five themes:

- Overall effectiveness of the programme
- Effectiveness of the skills courses offered by the programme
- Effectiveness of coaching during the programme
- Tangible academic outcomes of the programme
- Additional components

Overall effectiveness of the programme

The participants had some common expectations of the programme: to 'provide some of the tools and help to formulate timeframes for goals to be completed'; 'set and attain goals that would help complete the PhD and getting support other than that from the Supervisors'; and 'obtain additional support to meet goals and dreams to obtain my PhD'.

More specific personal expectations which were not research objectives included 'gaining an understanding of the programme, so that I could implement it to help others in my field'; and 'more time to do actual writing.'

One participant who was sure that she wouldn't need too much support expressed her surprise when she said:

> *The programme has helped me to focus on my PhD during a period of marked changes and upheavals in my employment conditions. I have realised that a large part of my current occupation is geared toward research and I really do enjoy my job as well as my PhD project. I have already received funding for work I want to continue after my PhD.*

Some participants increased their self-awareness and learnt to interact better with others. One man who had difficulty making himself heard said this about the effectiveness of the programme:

> *It made me look at myself critically and point out strengths and weaknesses and suggest ways of dealing with the weaknesses. I learnt to be more assertive in a non confrontational manner, it made a big difference.*

Participants overwhelmed with urgent workload deadlines plus doctoral studies were intrigued by changes in their perception of the time available for coaching. One woman who travelled considerable distances for coaching expressed how pleased she was:

> *Coaching was a really valuable experience, despite working out in Krugersdorp and having many commitments, clinical, admin, teaching etc, I find myself making the time to fit in a session with my coach.*

The benefits to her and other participants of coaching support far outweighed the inconvenience of getting to coaching sessions and clearly indicate that participants realised what they would be missing by not

having coaching during their doctoral studies. The PhD Acceleration Programme was effective in fulfilling and exceeding their expectations in ways which surprised and delighted them.

Effectiveness of the research skills courses offered by the programme

Research Writing

The Research Writing course was voted the most useful course. One participant said about his experience:

> *This was helpful because it taught me how to manage my time, and not be pre-occupied with minor issues such as spelling and grammar issues until the end of the draft.*

Other skills courses

Participants found the core courses valuable and invigorating as practical skills were especially useful. The Voice and Presentation Skills workshop helped in preparation for public speaking at conference presentations. The Time and Stress Management workshop provided simple, effective ways to avoid time wasting and more efficient ways of managing time. One researcher commented on the skills gained for managing changes in work conditions:

> *A large portion of the way I have managed to accept and adapt to the changes has come through the Time and Stress management workshop.*

Gaining control of one's time is crucial to allocating sufficient time to research and writing for the doctorate and has lasting benefits.

Effectiveness of coaching during the programme

The participants mentioned three particular areas that were enhanced by the coaching: goal setting, work-life balance and stress reduction.

A really important part of the coaching process was providing the opportunity for explicit and overt goal setting, prioritising and looking at long-term objectives. Without exception, all participants said that their coaches were instrumental in helping them achieve their goals. One participant claimed:

> *The value of the coaching has not only been to meet goals for PhD but has given me insights into the way I plan and organise myself for all work projects. My coach has helped me to put my work into perspective and helped me to plan for future projects after the completion of my PhD.*

The most valuable aspect of coaching was the built-in systematic internal accountability. Participants valued the regular feedback on their ongoing work and studies and found it easier for them to look at short-term achievements in relation to the ultimate goal of obtaining their doctorates. One man noted his coach's insistence on accountability when he said:

> *My coach made me set goals for PhD progress and would use them often.*

Striking a balance between competing forces of work, doctoral studies and life outside of work was an important output of the coaching process. One man said this about his coach's emphasis on balance:

> *My coach made me realise the importance of family and family support if one is to prosper in the PhD task. (She) made me realise that one has to make time for the other activities in life.*

Developing new skills in managing their full-time workload to free up time to work on the doctorate was also an outcome for participants. One overloaded woman asserted:

> *I had to incorporate PhD work into my daily routine of managing a busy laboratory. In order to do this I had to train and delegate work to other staff to free up time to do laboratory work for the PhD.*

Thus, an important outcome of the coaching was helping the coachees do research within the work environment instead of taking a 'time-off sabbatical'.

Another output achieved through the coaching process was stress reduction in a number of areas related to the PhD work as this comment illustrates:

> *My coach helped put things in perspective, helped set realistic goals by taking into account everything that was happening in my life – and it was a lot!*

Coaches assisted participants to think more laterally when stuck on a particular problem. Not being fixated on only one way of doing things reduced the stress involved for one woman who said:

> *My coach looked at options in terms of my goals e.g. I would be rigidly thinking I had to complete a certain section by a certain time; my coach, realising my personality attributes, helped me to look at different options when completion was not possible.*

Making the doctoral process less fraught and more positive is a bonus as one participant realised that she could enjoy doing her doctorate:

> *My coach has helped me to understand that I am not always to blame if my targets were not met for a particular section of my PhD. He has helped me to put my PhD into perspective and not see it as an enormous hurdle but rather something to enjoy.*

While such advice could have been given by supervisors it was clear that coaches focus on wider issues than the research and the thesis itself and made the whole process less anxiety producing; thus, accelerating participants' progress.

Tangible academic outcomes of the programme

The tangible outcomes and other changes experienced by participants contributed to visible progress in their doctoral studies (table 1). At the end of the coaching year these candidates had been registered for doctoral studies for a total of three years, much of it part-time. Completion was thus not necessarily a realistic possibility. The outputs must be seen in addition to full-time ward rounds, teaching, administration and supervision of students and as part of the path to completion of the doctorate.

Table 1: Tangible outputs from the PhD Acceleration Programme in Health Sciences during 2009.

Outcome	**Women**	**Men**
PhD completed		1(A)*
PhD first draft completed	1 (I)*	
PhD chapters completed (n=3)	1(W)*	1(A)
Papers accepted for publication		
International journal		1(A)
National journal	1(W)	
Papers under review	1(W)	2 (A)
Conference presentations		
Conference presentations – International	1 (W)	1 (A)
Seminars	1(I)	

(A)* is African; (I)* is Indian; (W)* is White.

One man completed his doctorate within the expected time and has identified six research articles from his PhD. The other three participants made what they reported as considerable progress on their doctorates as well as establishing publication records, a major achievement during doctoral studies, as two participants were not expected to publish in addition to their studies. One participant, who is required to complete his PhD by publication, published one article, has another under review and a third article almost complete. At the time of writing, a total of three participants had submitted their doctorates for examination.

Completion of the one PhD currently earns a university ZAR382 892.51 and each of the two papers published earns ZAR180 000, bringing a total income of ZAR742 892.51 to the University during the year of the study. There will be an additional ZAR540 000 in earnings when the papers under review are published and an additional ZAR1 148 667.53 when the other three PhDs are completed – two were examined in 2010. The outputs from the PhD students on the programme could thus generate ZAR2 431 570.00 in total for the University.

Additional comments

Several valuable additional comments were made. Two participants went on a week-long faculty writing retreat, which was not part of the programme, but which they found to be very valuable. Two participants found a three month mini-sabbatical useful, getting 'time off' from teaching and administration work to write their research. For one man it was critical to his success:

> *Time off to write is a very important part of the PhD completion process. Without 'time off' and writing retreats it would have been impossible for me to complete my study.*

An unexpected gain was the positive effect that the coaching of participants had on their doctoral supervisors. One participant said:

> *My supervisor has also commented on how useful the programme is i.e. the workshops and coaching as my comments and feedback have given her insight as well.*

It is clear that the research writing course was considered the most important hard skill learnt during the programme, while the effectiveness of the coaching was not only highly valued but essential to the participants' progress and outputs in their doctoral studies.

Discussion and conclusion

The explicit message of the PhD Acceleration Programme in the Health Sciences Faculty at Wits is that completion of doctorates is crucial and the University is willing to provide extensive internal resources to assist full-time academics in achieving this aim. According to the participants, the programme had a considerable impact on their doctoral studies as well as their personal development. The programme did not, however, replace the need to get 'time off' to write undisturbed. The coaching was crucial to the success of the programme because coaches were able to incorporate the knowledge gained in the skills courses with the goal setting so that participants made important discoveries about themselves and then aligned that knowledge with their set goals. Coaching was thus instrumental in integrating the whole programme to make it much more effective than the sum of the parts.

The findings of this research show three important outcomes of the coaching. Firstly, participants managed their time and workload in more proactive ways than they had before the programme. Secondly, as a result of critical shifts in thinking about their work-life balance, participants aligned their self-awareness with their research goals. Thirdly, coaching assisted with stress reduction and they found the doctoral process more intellectually stimulating and pleasurable and less stressful, supporting the findings in Grant (2003). Therefore, we could confirm that the research writing course and the coaching improved the progress of full-time academics in the Faculty of Health Sciences through their doctoral studies.

We were interested in whether the programme could be considered as a low-cost intervention by the University finance department. The total cost for four participants attending courses and using four trained coaches for the year-long programme was ZAR113 000. The University recovers its investment through government funding received as a result of doctoral completion and journal articles published in accredited journals. The total income of ZAR742 892.51 earned in the one year of the programme is six times the initial investment by the University. Future research outputs by these four participants only increases the benefit without any increase in cost. Any future coaching by these four trained coaches provides a much higher return on investment. Additional costs for 'time-off sabbaticals' and writing retreats were not included in this cost estimate as they were not designed as part of this programme. It is not possible to determine what impact the programme had on the outputs and whether they would have been obtained

without the skills training and coaching but participants themselves stated that the programme accelerated the completion of their doctorates.

Not only is there a good return on investment in monetary terms but completion of doctorates increases the capacity of the institution in the number of supervisors for incoming doctoral students. The coaching process in this programme may assist the participants to supervise their own students more effectively; thus, decreasing the drop-out rate of future postgraduate students and producing an amplification of the initial monetary gains. The participant's tangible outputs will percolate down to provide a quantifiable performance measure for the University.

Less measurable outputs are the changes in attitudes expressed by participants after coaching. They have become more confident in their ability to deal with research while living complicated work lives. They are aware of institutional support which may provide the University with more loyal employees (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns & Marshall, 2007). The skills and attitudes learnt during the programme have better equipped the participants to produce research and written outputs in years to come.

The results of this study are not limited to staff in the Health Sciences. We strongly recommend that all staff completing doctoral degrees should be supported during their studies. Vital components of such a programme are courses on research writing and time and stress management as well as individual coaching. The use of coaches makes the support offered by the University of the Witwatersrand an innovative, low-cost and sustainable programme. These are crucial considerations for all universities wanting to increase the number of staff members with doctorates.

References

Academy of Sciences South Africa (ASSAF) 2010. *The PhD Study*. Consensus report.

Backhouse J 2010. Patterns of practice in South African doctoral education: An empirical study. *Acta Academica Supplementum*, **1**:1-22.

De Janasz SC & Sullivan SE 2004. Multiple mentoring in academe: Developing the professional network. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **64**:263-283.

Frisch MH 2001. The emerging role of the internal coach. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, **53**:240-250.

Gardiner M, Tiggemann M, Kearns H & Marshall K 2007. Show me the money! An empirical analysis of mentoring outcomes for women in academia. *Higher Education Research & Development*, **26**:425-442.

Geber HM 2009. Research success and structured support: Developing early career academics in Higher Education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, **23**:673-688.

Geber HM 2010. Accelerating research productivity with structured support in a research intensive university. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, **8**:64-78.

Grant AM 2003. The impact of life coaching on goal attainment, metacognition and mental health. *Social Behavior and Personality*, **31**:253-264.

Griffiths K 2005. Personal coaching: A model for effective learning. *Journal of*

Learning Design, **1**:55-65.

Hargrove R 2003. *Masterful coaching: Extraordinary results by impacting people on the way they think and work together.* San Francisco; Jossey-Bass.

Hurd JL 2002. Learning for life: A phenomenological investigation into the effect of organizational coaching on individual lives. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Union Institute and University Graduate college, USA.

Kolb DA 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Lewin K 1951. *Field theory in social science*. New York: Harper.

Mezirow J 2000. *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Patton MQ 1990. *Qualitative evaluation methods.* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.