

# The coach developer as a flâneur and the funnel of observation

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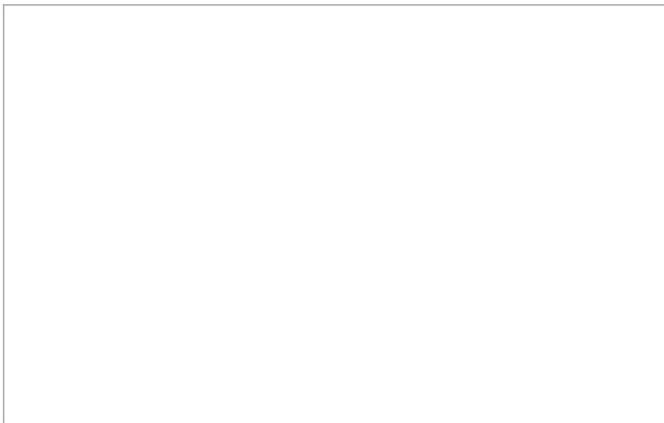
The disruptive circumstances we are currently confronting have at least provided opportunities to engage in conversations and discussions that otherwise might not have happened. One such example is the regular 'Coach Developer Conversations' that UK Coaching have organised on a weekly basis. These conversations have ranged across several topics and ideas such as our identity as coach developers, the boundaries we work within and across, confronting uncertainty and how we make a difference. As I have listened to the conversations my own thoughts have turned to the work of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin and the extent to which coach developers might adopt similar characteristics to the flâneur they wrote about.

Baudelaire and Benjamin both drew on the idea of the flâneur to describe and capture the culture of Paris in the nineteenth century. For Baudelaire and Benjamin the flâneur is a meandering and sauntering wanderer, a character who aimlessly but perceptively observes and absorbs the sights, smells and sounds of the urban landscape. For the flâneur the city is a visceral immersive experience, a kaleidoscope of life to be continually interpreted, imagined and understood. Not wanting to be told what to look at, or look for, the flâneur isn't a tourist but a curious and intrigued spectator capable of attuning to different aspects of their surroundings, narrowing or broadening their observational gaze as appropriate. For Benjamin the flâneur is also a witness and chronicler of the social processes that shape life in the city and how the history of the city imprints itself into the present. Like constructing an alternative cartography, the flâneur maps the city not purely in its physical form but through the inter-relationship of the physical and the social through the past, the present and the future. In his unfinished *Arcades Project* for example Benjamin uses the character of the flâneur as an analytical tool to observe and describe Paris as a city whose culture is being transformed by the processes of consumer capital, notably the emergence of fashion.

For coach developers coaching is our urban environment, and just like a flâneur perceptively observes street life we are the equally perceptive observers of coaching practice. We notice the things that coaches do which others might miss and remain wary of allowing our observations to become overly structured by criteria or competencies. We don't need the tourist guidebook to coaching to direct our gaze. Coaching is another complex and kaleidoscopic environment and like the flâneur our role is to interpret and make sense of our observations and experiences. In doing so we are mindful and aware of our own biases and ideas about coaching and how they influence what we see. Seeking a degree of detachment in this regard is a challenge for anyone developing coaches.

Such complexity means we draw on varied and different approaches to support learning, and like walking through different streets each approach has its own character and makes a different contribution to the richness and vibrancy of the learning environment we are intending to create. When we analyse and reflect then like the flâneur we are chronicling the reality of what we have seen and trying to understand where this practice has come from, the decisions and judgements the coach has made alongside the social and institutional processes that are imprinted onto the practice, perhaps even the relationships of power that might be evident. There is much that the coach developer and the flâneur have in common, not least a shared affinity in being curious and zizzical observers of their respective environments.

However, as coach developers we do not walk alone for it is always a shared experience with the coaches we are supporting and undertaken with the intent to help them become more effective practitioners. Coach developers are therefore not whimsical lonesome wanderers, but a type of collaborating guide possessed with the skill and dexterity to navigate coaches through aspects of their development. To achieve this, and again like the flâneur, we are adept at attuning our observation to the needs of each coach, a skill acquired through experience and our own learning. Whilst accepting that sometimes what we observe is a 'performance' put on for our benefit attuning our observational focus might be said to represent a funnel like structure in which our observations are continuously passing.



As the diagram alludes to the narrow end of the funnel represents the sharpest most specific aspect of our observational focus. This is where we hone in on a certain detail, where everything else becomes noise and distraction. It is towards this end of the funnel that our gaze can often be directed by assessment criteria or a list of required competencies, where observation is determined for us not by us. At the broad end of the funnel everything is in focus. Here we see not just the relationships between the coach and performer, but between the coach and the relationships they sustain with many others. It is at this point where we observe the coach in the micro-political environment of their organisational context. Where we see the coach in and amongst the whole landscape, like situating and understanding a building in the context of everything else around it.

It doesn't matter where we start our observations from, perhaps the start point is sometimes determined for us through a specific role, for example as an assessor. Circumstances might also dictate that we will only ever support a coach at the narrower end of the funnel, engaging in conversations that address specific aspects of their practice and never being able to observe the wider environment in which they are located. Nevertheless, the skill of the coach developer to operate across an observational spectrum is inherent in our role and one that should be integral to our self-awareness.

As I think about my identity as a coach developer the potential parallels with the flâneur become more helpful in understanding my purpose. In pursuing my purpose to help coaches learn and develop I travel on a journey with them that takes us across a complex environment, a space to be explored and made sense of. In navigating this environment I try to adopt similar characteristics to the flâneur by observing, noticing, being curious, open-minded and intrigued about the coaching I'm witnessing. As I subsequently analyse and reflect then like the flâneur I'm chronicling the reality of what I have seen and trying to understand and find patterns and reasons that enable me to make better sense of this practice, where this practice has come from and the broader social processes influencing the practice.

If I call myself a coach developer then it is partly because I aspire to become a skilled observer of coaching that is central to my identity, and this is similar to the identity of the flâneur as a perceptive observer of urban life. Arguably some of the attributes and characteristics are the same and we have Paris to thank for that.

tags : learning, detachment, flâneur, guide-book, observation