

Table of Contents

Document 1: Curriculum Vitae and Job Descriptions	1
Curriculum Vitae	1
Job Description: Learn ²	14
Job Description: KasKor Business Coaching	21
Reference List	25
Document 2: Reflective Essay	26
Reflective Essay	26
Reference List	44
Document 3: RPEL RAL Module cover sheet	46
Document 4: PL3b Form	48
PL3b Form	48
Reference List	54
Evidence List	55
Document 5: Learning Areas	58
Learning Area 1 (60 credits)	58
Introduction	58
Learning Outcome 1	61
Learning Outcome 2	73
Learning Outcome 3	89
Learning Outcome 4	106
Reference List	119
Learning Area 2 (40 credits)	123
Introduction	123
Learning Outcome 1	125
Learning Outcome 2	140
Learning Outcome 3	154
Reference List	169

REFLECTIVE ESSAY – ASSALIAN 2240987

In this reflective essay, I will critically analyze and evaluate my personal and professional experiences, integrating academic theory and practice. My goal is to reflect on my learning to enhance my critical thinking and self-awareness and to systematically apply theoretical insights to elevate my coaching practice.

My reflective essay is structured as follows:

Theme 1: Learning to Learn

In this section, I will analyze my approaches and strategies for effective learning, integrating theoretical underpinnings to enhance self-directed and lifelong learning capabilities.

Theme 2: Uncovering Assumptions, Biases and Expectations

Here, I will critically evaluate my underlying assumptions, biases and expectations, and their impact on my practice and decision-making processes.

Theme 3: Navigating Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL) Process Challenges

This section will deeply explore the particular challenges encountered during the completion of the RAL process.

By systematically reflecting on these themes, I aim to enhance my critical thinking and professional practice through the application of relevant insights.

In the process of identifying a suitable framework for my reflective essay, I reviewed and evaluated various experiential learning models, including:

- Driscoll's "What? So what? Now what?" model of reflection (1994)
- Kolb's approach to experiential learning: "concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC) and active experimentation (AE)" (2015, p. 42)
- Peters' "Describe, Analyze, Theorize, Act" reflective model (1991)

After critically examining these models, I selected **Gibbs' Reflective Cycle** (1988, p. 49-50). I was particularly drawn to this model for its simplicity, straightforward structure,

practical language and inclusion of feelings, which I found to be a powerful and integral aspect of reflective practice.

THEME 1: LEARNING TO LEARN

Within the first theme of "Learning to Learn," I will explore two key components. **Firstly**, I will examine the Visual, Aural, Read/Write, Kinesthetic (VARK) (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) and Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic (VAK) (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) learning styles. **Secondly**, I will delve into other learning theories, including **Multiple Intelligences** (Edutopic.org, 2009), **Memletics** (Learning-styles-online.com, 2011), **experiential learning** styles (Munster Technological University, 2024) and the **depths of learning** (Wilson and Bedford, 2009, p.7). I will critically reflect on how these various learning styles and theories have impacted and shaped my learning process throughout the RAL module and my coaching practice.

DESCRIPTION

For context, I have **always had a passion for learning** and acquiring knowledge. With a bachelor's degree in science, my inclination has been towards facts, research and evidence-based learning. However, acquiring knowledge has consistently been a challenge, throughout my schooling and professional life, I have often taken **much longer** to learn or complete projects compared to my peers. This made the RAL module particularly intriguing, as it offered an opportunity to explore how to enhance my learning through understanding my **learning style**. Excited by this prospect, I promptly engaged with the **VARK** (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) **and VAK tests** (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023).

FEELINGS

In critically reflecting on my thoughts and feelings **before** both these tests, I experienced a mix of excitement and apprehension. I was eager to learn and acquire additional knowledge but I was also somewhat intimidated by the prospect of academic learning, given the extended time it typically took for me to grasp new concepts. I anticipated that discovering my learning styles would provide strategies to enhance my efficiency and effectiveness in

learning. I was particularly enthusiastic about uncovering my preferred learning styles, hoping it would enable me to better receive, process and retain information

After taking the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) and VAK (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) tests, I found myself feeling disappointed, discouraged, confused and frustrated. The results did not align with my expectations and failed to offer clear guidance on how I could improve my learning efficiency and effectiveness.

EVALUATION

In reflecting on and evaluating the outcomes of both these tests, I identified **two** primary **issues** that hindered their effectiveness. **Firstly**, the results were not only different but also contradictory. For instance, the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) test ranked Kinesthetic learning as my highest preference, while the VAK (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) test placed it as my lowest. This inconsistency made it difficult to draw clear conclusions. **Secondly**, discovering that I had a multimodal learning preference did not clarify how I should adapt my learning strategies to be more effective. According to the RAL Handbook (University of Wales Trinity Saint David Institute of Management and Health, no date, p. 48), knowing my preferred learning style should help me understand the type of learning that works best for me. This was not the case, as the guidance provided did not translate into actionable strategies for improving my learning efficiency.

On the positive side, in reflecting and evaluating what **went well** with the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) and VAK (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) tests, I noted two significant factors. **Firstly**, I objectively questioned the **validity** of the results while taking the test. I realized that my responses were often more influenced by the context of the questions rather than by my true learning preferences. This critical questioning underscored the importance of critical thinking in accurately assessing various situations and making informed decisions. **Secondly**, I **persisted** in exploring and learning about additional learning styles, which led me to discover an alternative perspective by Marshik (TEDx Talks, 2015). In this video, Marshik argued that the concept of learning styles was a myth, which reinforced my doubts about the validity of the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) and VAK (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) results.

ANALYSIS

In critically analyzing the **cause** of my negative reaction to the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) and VAK (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) results as well as the reason behind my high expectations for those tests, I identified **two primary** assumptions and judgements I had made about their value and importance. **Firstly**, I had anticipated discovering a definitive solution that would decisively resolve the challenges and obstacles responsible for my slower learning pace. I believed these tests would provide conclusive answers, enabling a significant improvement in my learning process. **Secondly**, I recognized that my confirmation bias (Wason, 1960) had momentarily reinforced my belief that my **intellectual capability** was directly tied to the outcomes of the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) and VAK (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) tests.

On the **positive side**, in critically analyzing the factors contributing to what **went well**, I found that hearing from a credible expert, Tesia Marshik, identified by a trusted source, the RAL Handbook (University of Wales Trinity Saint David Institute of Management and Health, no date, p. 48), brought immediate relief and clarity (TEDx Talks, 2015). Marshik's plain and unequivocal discussion on the myths of learning styles enabled me to critically re-evaluate my expectations. This re-evaluation provided a sense of serenity regarding my learning capacity and allowed me to approach my learning journey with a more informed and balanced perspective.

CONCLUSION AND ACTION PLAN

Later in Theme 1: Learning to Learn, I will draw conclusions and outline an action plan to enhance my overall learning experience.

DESCRIPTION - OTHER LEARNING THEORIES

I **explored different learning theories** beyond the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) and VAK (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) learning styles for **two main reasons**. **Firstly**, I did not find a clear strategy or solution to enhance my learning effectiveness or efficiency from these initial models. **Secondly**, in the video by Tesia Marshik, she emphasized that “most of what you learn is stored in terms of **meaning**” (TEDx Talks, 2015, 4:15). This statement piqued my curiosity and prompted me to delve deeper

into understanding how “meaning” influences learning. Below, I will reflect on and examine how these insights can be applied to improve my learning processes and outcomes. Through exploring various learning theories and concepts, I acquired additional knowledge, evidenced by the following analysis and assessments:

- The **Memletics** learning style assessment (Learning Styles Online, 2011) revealed that I learn best as a **solitary learner**, with my secondary preference being **engagement with others**. This outcome aligned with the **Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory** (Edutopic.org, 2009) which identified my predominant and secondary intelligences as **intrapersonal and interpersonal**, respectively.
- In **experiential learning** settings, I exhibited a **pragmatist learning style** (Munster Technological University, 2024), thriving on practical application and problem-solving.
- Among the **three levels of learning depth** identified by Wilson and Bedford (2009, p. 7, cognitive, conceptual and application, I related most effectively to, and felt most comfortable and confident when I reach the third level, which corresponds to the **application stage**. This is when I am capable of articulating what I've learned to others. This approach is also consistent with achieving the “conscious competence” state of learning as described by Broadwell (1969, pp. 1-3a).

FEELINGS

In critically reflecting on my feelings prior to exploring these additional learning theories and concepts, I had no specific expectations but was particularly intrigued by the **Multiple Intelligences theory** (Edutopic.org, 2009). I viewed it as an opportunity to identify and understand my unique intellectual strengths, offering a positive and empowering view of my intelligence, a discovery that felt both risk-free and uplifting. My initial interest naturally extended to exploring other learning styles, driven by a desire to deepen my knowledge.

After assessing my learning through the lens of diverse theories and concepts, I found myself agreeing with the outcomes. However, I realized that I had previously underestimated the value of these results because I had placed excessive reliance on the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) **and VAK** (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) tests. This critical reflection highlighted the importance of a broader, more inclusive approach to understanding and enhancing my learning process.

EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS

In critically reflecting on and evaluating the results of my exploration of learning theories and concepts beyond the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) **and VAK** (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) tests, I determined that the findings were neither particularly significant nor impactful. In analyzing the **reasons behind my neutral** evaluation of these results, I identified two key reasons. **Firstly**, after my experience with the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) **and VAK** (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) tests, I approached subsequent theories without specific **expectations or preconceived** beliefs regarding their impact my learning abilities. **Secondly**, I found the results **agreeable and relatable**, recognizing them as valid reflections of my current learning process.

CONCLUSION

In critically reflecting on my learning styles, I reached several conclusions about the knowledge I acquired. **Firstly**, I realized that I had been viewing learning styles, particularly VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024), as a potential solution to fix my learning process. I had long perceived my learning method as a personal challenge, hoping that identifying a specific style could overcome this obstacle. **Secondly**, after critically evaluating my experience with the VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) **and VAK** (Training Materials & Courseware Resource, 2023) tests. I realized that I had initially perceived my multimodal learning style results as a negative aspect. I now understand that my ability to learn through various modalities can be considered a significant strength, offering flexibility and adaptability in different learning contexts. **Thirdly**, as previously noted, to feel comfortable and confident in my learning as a pragmatist, I must reach the deepest level of understanding. This depth enables me to apply the acquired knowledge effectively with my coachees and to convey it to them in a meaningful and impactful way.

In critically reflecting on the **gaps in my knowledge of learning styles**, four primary areas emerged that required further exploration. **Firstly**, as a self-identified iterative learner, I remained uncertain about where this learning approach fits within established theoretical frameworks and how best to integrate it for more effective and efficient learning. **Secondly**, I was unclear about how a learner's individual characteristics, as identified through personality assessments, aligned with and influenced their learning styles. **Thirdly**, I was

uncertain whether a distinction exists between one's natural learning style and an adaptive learning style, prompting me to question how innate preferences differed from those developed through adaptation to traditional learning contexts. **Fourthly**, there remained a significant gap in my capacity to decipher the complexities of optimizing my learning efficiency. Despite various assessments and reflections, I have yet to uncover the strategies and insights necessary to optimize my learning process. Addressing these gaps will be essential for a more comprehensive understanding and application of learning theories to improve my personal and professional development.

Finally, in critically reflecting on how my understanding of learning styles could influence my coaching practice, I concluded that, despite lingering questions, certain theories and concepts could be highly beneficial. Testing the integration of learning styles, especially those that aligned with preferred experiential learning methods, could be of benefit to my coachees. By adapting these approaches, I can better cater to the diverse learning preferences of my coachees, potentially enhancing the effectiveness of my coaching practice.

ACTION PLAN

In critically reflecting on an action plan to deepen my understanding of learning style, I identified **several key steps**. **Firstly**, I intend to implement a two-step process informed by Multiple Intelligence Theory (Edutopic.org, 2009) and Memletics (Learning-styles-online.com, 2011). This process begins with engaging as a solitary learner to deeply process and acquire additional knowledge about learning theories and concepts. Following this, I will consult with experts or knowledgeable peers who can guide me in deciphering challenges and learning more efficiently. **Secondly**, I need to be more strategic and intentional in selecting which VARK (VARK helping you learn better, 2024) modality to employ, tailoring my approach based on the specific circumstances of each learning situation. By adopting this nuanced approach, I aim to optimize my learning process and enhance my overall developmental experience. This is a priority as I complete my MA in Coaching and Mentoring.

In concluding Theme 1: Learning to Learn, I have critically reflected on my approaches and strategies for effective learning. By integrating academic underpinnings such as **Multiple**

Intelligence Theory (Edutopic.org, 2009) and **experiential learning styles**, I have gained deeper insights into how I process and apply knowledge. This reflection has enhanced my self-awareness and highlighted areas for further exploration of learning theories and concepts. These insights will serve as a foundation for refining my coaching practice, enabling me to more effectively support coachees in their learning journeys.

THEME 2: UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS, BIASES AND EXPECTATIONS

Moving into Theme 2: Uncovering Assumptions, Biases and Expectations, I will critically reflect on and analyze my portfolio to evaluate the underlying assumptions, biases and expectations that shape my self-perception and coaching practice. My goal is to uncover and understand these elements to determine their influence on my interactions and outcomes. This introspective analysis will deepen my awareness of the unconscious influences that have guided my actions and decisions, thereby paving the way for more conscious and objective practices in my coaching role. By doing so, I aim to enhance the effectiveness and integrity of my professional approach.

DESCRIPTION

In reflecting on my portfolio, I uncovered **two fundamentals beliefs** that have driven my assumptions, biases and expectations about myself and my coaching practice. These beliefs were at the core of how I perceived and interacted with myself, my role and my coachees, both personally and professionally.

1. **Excellence:** I expected excellence from myself and assumed that everyone else aspired to that standard. This belief led me to set high expectations, not only for my own performance but also for those I coach, often presuming a universal desire for excellence in all endeavors.
2. **Science:** I held a strong bias towards research, data and evidence. I tended to unconsciously assign greater importance to people and things if they were validated by science. Conversely, I perceived anything that was not backed up by science to have lesser significance.

These core beliefs were evident in my two learning areas:

- **Learning Area 1:** Research, design and evaluate coaching effectiveness within an organization through the use of coaching principles. This area emphasized the use of **scientific methods** and data to quantify coaching effectiveness, aligning with my strong bias towards evidence-based practices.
- **Learning Area 2:** Research, analyze and assess coaching effectiveness at navigating the complexities of the phase that is known as the “messy middle” (Brown, 2015, p. 26-28) in relation to performance. This area focused on the pursuit of excellence, dedicated to understanding factors that either facilitated or impeded performance leading up to, during and moving through the challenges of achieving a goal or a desired outcome.

FEELINGS

In reflecting on and analyzing my initial feelings about excellence, I had always been aware of and proud of my high standards, perceiving them as advantageous in both personal and professional contexts. I believed that achieving excellence in coaching required a mix of art and science, a perspective rooted in my bachelor’s degree in science, which instilled a deep appreciation for data and evidence (refer to Learning Area 2, Learning Outcome 1 for details).

Upon uncovering my fundamental assumptions, biases and expectations about **excellence**, I began to critically question the impact these beliefs have had on myself and my coaching practice. I had not previously considered the **negative** aspects of my pursuit of excellence or how it led me to judge myself, colleagues and coachees who, in my view, did not demonstrate a similar commitment to excellence (refer to Learning Area 2, Learning Outcome 1 for an example with my coachee (AT)).

EVALUATION

In critically reflecting on and assessing the positive aspects of my assumptions, biases and expectations regarding excellence, I determined that these beliefs had significantly contributed to my personal and professional success. They have drawn **like-minded individuals** to me, and I to them, which had benefitted my coaching practice (refer to Learning Area 2, Learning Outcome 1 for an example regarding Dr Peggy Marshall’s

request to partner on a Peak Performance track). Similarly, my inclination towards science, research and the pursuit of knowledge positively influenced my coaching methodologies, fostering a **data-driven approach** that enriched and enhanced my coaching practice.

Conversely, in critically reflecting on and assessing the **negative** aspects of my assumptions, biases and expectations about excellence, I realized that these beliefs had created **undue pressure**. By consistently comparing myself to the **highest** standards, I may have imposed unnecessary and excessive **expectations** on myself, which likely undermined my **confidence**. For instance, I focused on the highest marking criteria for the RAL module, rather than those necessary to pass, thereby subjecting myself to undue pressure.

Additionally, in critically reflecting on and assessing the negative aspects of my assumptions, biases and expectations regarding **excellence**, I determined that these beliefs may have adversely affected my **coaching practice**. They occasionally led me to **judge**, become **impatient** or have unrealistic expectations of my coachees by overestimating their abilities. This overestimation aligned with my underlying assumptions and hindered my ability to provide the appropriate level of support and guidance to coachees, thereby affecting the overall effectiveness of my coaching practice, as referenced above with the example of one of my coachees (AT).

Furthermore, in critically reflecting on and assessing the drawbacks of heavily relying on science, research, data and evidence when addressing challenges, I have come to realize that the pursuit of a single source of truth can be problematic. Scientific findings may be **contradictory**, compelling me to delve deeper into **meta-analyses**. This pursuit can be excessively time-consuming and frequently propelled me into an intricate exploration, as detailed below in Theme 3: Navigating the RAL Process Challenges.

ANALYSIS

In critically reflecting on and investigating the **source** of my desire to **pursue excellence**, I aligned with Kotler's perspective that "the only thing more difficult than the emotional toil of pursuing true excellence is the emotional toil of not pursuing true excellence" (2021, p. 2-3).

This sentiment resonated deeply with me. Since grade school, I have been driven by a curiosity for human performance excellence.

Additionally, in critically examining the **source** of my bias towards **science**, I recognized that, as stated earlier, my inclination for facts, research and evidence-based learning stemmed from my Bachelor of Science degree. This scientific foundation influenced my decision to pursue a **Master's degree in Coaching and Mentoring**, driven by my strong preference for research and evidence, which I held in high regard.

In critically appraising my learning outcomes from the RAL module, I **initially expected** to acquire additional knowledge of **coaching methodologies and theories**. However, as I progressed through the module, I recognized that the true value lay in the third state of experiential learning called “**reflective learning**” (Jarvis, 1992, p. 72). Through this process, I gained profound insights into myself by uncovering my assumptions, biases and expectations. This self-discovery has, and will continue to, significantly enhance my coaching practice.

In critically reflecting on the **source** of the negative impact of constantly striving for excellence, I uncovered that my desire for **perfection** and **avoidance of mistakes** often led me to underestimate my own instincts and intuition. For example, when faced with a task in which I lacked experience, I assessed whether I had sufficient knowledge of coaching methodologies or theories to succeed. I discovered that in the absence of experience and academic underpinning, I doubted my abilities and hesitated to trust my intuition, primarily to **avoid error in my coaching practice**. This caution, fueled by my relentless pursuit of excellence, hindered my ability to innovate and adapt spontaneously with my coachees. For instance, I assumed that I lacked the necessary expertise to accurately identify the components of an ROI implementation framework, primarily due to my lack of **prior experience in** evaluating training or coaching programs (refer to Learning Area 1, Learning Outcome 2 for details). This self-doubt stemmed from an overemphasis on perfection and a reluctance to trust my intuition.

CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the impact of my unconscious assumptions, biases and expectations regarding excellence, I realized how profoundly they have shaped my coaching practice. High expectations were beneficial, especially when I believed in my coachees' abilities, which boosted their confidence and inspired high standards. However, there were times when these same high expectations **were counterproductive**. For instance, I assumed that all leaders would fully utilize the coaching opportunities available to them, based on my own assumptions and expectations rather than any academic underpinning (refer to Learning Area 1, Learning Outcome 2 for details). This taught me the importance of critically examining my expectations to determine whether they are grounded in genuine knowledge and experience or merely a reflection of my personal beliefs.

Finally, in critically reflecting on my assumptions, biases and expectations, I discovered a tendency to overemphasize and place a higher value on the gaps in my knowledge and understanding while undervaluing the expertise and capabilities I already possess. This realization highlighted a disproportionate focus on perceived deficiencies at the expense of recognizing and leveraging my existing strengths and accomplishments. This insight will guide me towards a more balanced and constructive approach to both self-assessment and coaching practice.

ACTION PLAN

In critically analyzing and assessing my learnings concerning my assumptions, biases and expectations, particularly those related to excellence and science, I identified **two key areas** for focus. **Firstly**, I need to continue uncovering and evaluating my underlying assumptions, biases and expectations. By challenging these beliefs, I can discern when they genuinely benefit me and enhance my coaching practice and when they do not. **Secondly**, I need to continue engaging in reflective practice to solidify my learning and support my ongoing evolution, both for my own growth and in service of my coachees.

In concluding Theme 2: Uncovering Assumptions, Biases and Expectations, I have critically examined my personal and professional experiences and uncovered underlying beliefs that have shaped my self-perception and coaching practice. This reflection revealed how

unconscious influences have impacted my interactions and overall approach. Gaining this awareness has enabled me to adopt more conscious and objective practices, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and integrity of my coaching.

THEME 3: NAVIGATING RAL PROCESS CHALLENGES

In Theme 3: **Navigating RAL Process Challenges**, I will critically examine the personal challenges I encountered during the completion of the RAL module and reflect on what I learned about myself in overcoming them. Through this reflective analysis, I aim to uncover insights into how these challenges shaped my learning journey and influenced my development as a coach. By exploring these obstacles, I aspire to enhance my ability to navigate similar processes in the future and improve my overall coaching practice. This introspective exploration will provide a deeper understanding of my resilience and adaptability, ultimately contributing to my growth and professional development.

DESCRIPTION AND FEELINGS

During the completion of the RAL module as part of my MA in Coaching and Mentoring, I encountered significant challenges that tested my resolve and commitment to the point where, on **two instances**, I considered abandoning the program.

The **first instance** occurred after I had invested considerable time and effort in compiling timelines and evidence for my first learning outcome. Despite my diligent efforts, my second draft of the critical reflection fell short of the requisite standards. Upon deep introspection regarding my **thoughts and feelings** at that juncture, I pinpointed **three** main factors that shaped my perspective. **Firstly**, I had set unrealistic expectations for myself, believing that my commitment to developing my portfolio and pursuing the MA in Coaching and Mentoring would allow me to complete the program ahead of **the three-year** period. **Secondly**, I had developed a plan that involved reducing my work schedule and setting aside **one day each week** specifically for my academic studies. However, personal matters frequently encroached upon this dedicated time and extended into my weekends, resulting in the ineffective execution of the plan. While some of these events were positive, such as the weddings of both of my daughters, others adversely affected my well-being to the extent that I needed to consult with a mental health professional. **Thirdly**, following my second unsuccessful attempt on November 17, 2023, to develop a critical reflection of my learning

outcome, I was disheartened by my lack of proficiency in the critical thinking and writing skills required for UK level 7 descriptors. This realization sparked concerns that it might jeopardize my goal of completing the program in under three years. Fortunately, with invaluable guidance and support from Sarah Loxdale, I made a third attempt. The outcome was encouraging. After revising the first two sentences of the learning outcome, I experienced a significant boost in my confidence, accompanied by a tangible physical reaction, indicative of enhanced self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). This newfound assurance strengthened my belief that I could deliver a portfolio that met expectations.

The **second instance** I considered abandoning the program occurred on March 26, 2024, when I realized that I would not meet the deadline for submitting my RAL portfolio. Reflecting on my feelings at that moment, I was utterly shocked, embarrassed, disappointed and confused about how I had reached that point. Although I was informed of the application process for extenuating circumstances, I found it difficult to accept or comprehend my situation and had momentarily decided to give up. Subsequently, I applied for an extension, and on April 15, 2024, it was granted. I was able to move forward but not before thoroughly evaluating the experience and its impact on my learning.

EVALUATION

In critically reflecting on and objectively assessing the two occasions where I contemplated abandoning **my MA in Coaching and Mentoring**, I discovered **four positive** and **three negative outcomes** that arose during this process, each linked to the challenges I faced while completing the RAL module.

The first positive outcome was that encountering these challenges early in my MA journey served as a defining moment and a pivotal catalyst for increased self-awareness and growth. It compelled me to develop a **more effective time management strategy**, leading me to guard the time dedicated to my studies more vigilantly. The **second** positive outcome was that these challenging experiences prompted introspection, profoundly impacting my coaching practice by enhancing my **empathy** towards my coachees and prompting a critical evaluation of my expectations of them. Uncovering my own **assumptions** and **biases**, as previously mentioned, made me less judgmental towards both my coachees and myself. This heightened self-awareness, prompted by what Mezirow and Associates called a

“disorienting dilemma” (2000, quoted in Jackson and Cox, 2018. p. 224), enabled me to adopt a more compassionate coaching approach. The **third positive** outcome was a departure from my usual practice of maintaining privacy about my struggles. This time, I chose to confide in a peer, Rhianydd Barnes, who graciously permitted me to share our conversation regarding the challenges I was experiencing. She revealed that she had faced similar obstacles, which was invaluable. Hearing about her experiences in a similar situation provided me with significant insights and underscored the importance of peer learning. The **fourth positive** outcome was that I experienced firsthand and successfully navigated the “**messy middle**” (Brown, 2015, p. 26-28) of performance, as described in my second learning area. Persevering through this challenging period significantly enhanced my coaching practice, particularly in **relating** to coachees who faced substantial obstacles and considered abandoning their goals.

In critically reflecting on and assessing the **negative outcomes** of my contemplation to abandon my MA in Coaching and Mentoring, I identified the **first** as the extended seven-month period it took to develop my first learning outcome that met the necessary requirements. This prolonged adaptation period was marked by a struggle to adjust my learning strategies and my failure to seek assistance. The **second negative** outcome was that I nearly allowed my negative **emotions** to push me towards giving up. It was through the encouragement of my husband, who reminded me of the significant effort I had already invested, that I managed to overcome these negative emotions and decide to persevere. This experience highlighted my struggle to independently manage and overcome my vulnerability to emotional setbacks. The **third negative** outcome was my initial failure to prioritize the most critical aspect: demonstrating the depth of my experiential learning through critical reflection and analysis of my personal and professional experiences. Instead, I focused excessively on collecting evidence, verifying dates and meticulously reviewing all my notes to avoid omissions.

ANALYSIS

In critically reflecting on and analyzing my near decision to abandon my MA in Coaching and Mentoring due to the challenges encountered in the RAL module, I identified **four deficiencies** that clarified the root of the difficulties I faced. **Firstly**, Woodley (2004) noted the two prevalent reasons for withdrawing from a program are the challenge of **balancing**

academic and other commitments and inadequate **knowledge of the program** prior to enrollment. Both factors were true for me; I **had underestimated the extent of** critical reflection and writing required in the RAL module. Additionally, under Theme 1: Learning to Learn, I was unconsciously incompetent (Broadwell, 1969), lacking an understanding of critical writing techniques.

Secondly, reflecting on why it took me **seven months** to complete the first learning outcome, I realized that, as described in Theme 1, I needed a deep understanding (Wilson and Bedford, 2009, p.7) to feel confident and meet my expectations of excellence. Confronted with choosing between speed and excellence, I opted for excellence, which aligned with my core values. Looking back, I now recognize that this situation presented me with a “**disorienting dilemma**” (Mezirow *et al.*, 2000, quoted in Jackson and Cox, 2018. p. 224), which challenged my established priorities and forced me to reassess how I balanced quality with timeliness.

The **third** critical insight I gained through my challenges was that my passion for acquiring knowledge drove me to extensively explore the resource library. For context, during my CBC™ coach training program (refer to my Curriculum Vitae and Learning Area 1, Learning Outcome 1 for details), I had previously criticized the lack of accessibility to evidence-based knowledge for coaches (Evidence – Essay.1 Lack of Accessibility).

Lastly, in my coaching practice, I was trained to prioritize our coachees by “listening cleanly” (Evidence - Essay.2 Listening Cleanly – p. 2) to them, deliberately shifting focus away from my own thoughts and feeling. In contrast, the critical thinking required, demanded the exact opposite. I had to engage deeply with my own perspectives, a transition that proved to be extremely challenging.

Conversely, in reflecting on and analyzing the factors contributing to the positive outcomes amid my contemplation of abandoning my MA in Coaching and Mentoring, I identified **two key insights**. Firstly, **Sarah Loxdale** a trusted and experienced expert in the RAL module, instilled in me the confidence to navigate the “messy middle” (Brown, 2015, p. 26-28). I learned that this confidence, inspired by Loxdale, was referred to as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). I acquired this academic underpinning while completing Learning Area 2 of my portfolio.

Secondly, the two occasions when I considered giving up were overcome by my **intrinsic motivation**, driven by three main reasons. **First**, the degree symbolized my definition of excellence, which, as explored in Theme 2: Uncovering Assumptions, Biases and Expectations, was critical to me. **Second**, I regarded coaching as a serious responsibility, given that coachees are often vulnerable, making it crucial to handle their well-being with care. The more knowledgeable and informed coaches are about their boundaries (refer to Learning Area 1, Learning Outcome 4 for details), the less harm they can potentially cause to coachees. **Third**, to fulfill my purpose of working with coachees and growing my coaching practice, I recognized the necessity of marketing and distinguishing myself effectively. Completing this degree was essential for achieving that goal.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my experiences while navigating the challenges of the RAL module during my MA in Coaching and Mentoring has been profoundly enlightening. I have learned that prioritizing mental health is paramount, as our cognitive capacities are significantly diminished without it. Additionally, I discovered that true excellence not only involved the pursuit of high standards but also the perseverance to overcome challenges. This newfound understanding will deeply impact my coaching practice by enhancing my empathy and my ability to relate to coachees facing similar adversities.

In critically reflecting on the instances I contemplated abandoning my studies, I realized that communicating my struggles earlier or seeking help sooner might not have significantly altered the outcome of the challenging experiences. In the first instance, I doubt that my learning curve would have been accelerated significantly. In the second instance, my mental health challenges peaked during the RAL module, inherently limiting my ability to manage the workload more effectively during that period.

To manage similar situations more effectively in the future, I need to adopt a more strategic approach to time management by strictly protecting dedicated periods for my work while setting stricter boundaries to ensure I am not perpetually available to others. Additionally, I should proactively engage with my peers and seek feedback about their experiences earlier and more consistently. This approach will allow me to benefit from their insights, thereby enhancing my ability to navigate challenges more effectively.

ACTION PLAN

In reflecting on my conclusions, I have identified areas where I need to course correct and implement different strategies. **First**, setting and respecting boundaries to protect my time and energy is crucial. This involves establishing non-negotiable study periods and effectively communicating these to family and friends. Regular reviews of my schedule will ensure these boundaries are maintained and adjusted as necessary. **Second**, prioritizing my academic commitments requires deliberately choosing to rank my MA above other responsibilities without feeling guilty. I must have the courage to decline conflicting priorities and practice self-compassion, acknowledging that focusing on my MA is essential for my long-term development. **Third**, I must resist the urge to showcase all the knowledge I have acquired and instead focus on the specific requirements of my studies.

In critically assessing the skills required to implement this action plan, I have concluded that reflection is crucial. I need to allocate regular time for reflection and elevate its importance for my personal and professional growth, much as I have valued and integrated reflection within my coaching practice. This reflective practice will be essential for ensuring continuous improvement and the effective application of these strategies.

FINAL THOUGHT

In this reflective essay, I have critically analyzed and evaluated my personal and professional experiences, integrating academic theory with practice to enhance my critical thinking and self-awareness. Employing a structured approach, I have systematically applied theoretical insights to advance my coaching practice, focusing on **three key themes**. By deeply reflecting on these themes, I have identified areas for personal growth, addressed gaps in my professional practice and developed a more profound understanding of the impact of my assumptions, biases and decision-making processes.

The selection of **Gibbs' Reflective Cycle** (1988, p. 49-50) as the framework for this reflective essay, has allowed me to engage in meaningful and transformative reflection. This process has reinforced my commitment to continuous improvement and lifelong learning, ultimately enhancing my effectiveness as a coach.

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