

*One question has run through **Annette Fillery-Travis**' outstanding coaching career: 'Where's the evidence?' That deep curiosity coupled with passion and a sense of fun has led to outstanding contributions to coaching and education. Liz Hall reports*

My lofty

# destiny

**“If we research coaching, we’re not going to lose the magic fairy dust at all,” but can instead trust more fully what we’re doing as coaching practitioners and be of greater benefit to our clients, believes Annette Fillery-Travis, renowned doctoral supervisor, coaching researcher and widely published author.**

In June 2023, she was given the *Coaching at Work* Editor’s Lifetime Achievement Award for her outstanding contributions to coaching and education. Since coaching’s infancy, she’s been highly instrumental in raising the bar and establishing a stronger evidence base, bringing in more rigour, evaluation, education and professionalism, championing and furthering practitioner-led research.

“The theme for my career in coaching has been ‘where’s the evidence? How can we get the research done?’ says Professor Fillery-Travis, academic director of University of Wales Trinity

St David (UWTSD) Doctoral College since 2021.

“I think professional practice is highly significant....there’s lots of contention, but I think one thing I contributed to, and there’s others too like Oxford Brookes, is [identifying] a need for a defined evidence base where people can really say, ‘This is where I can start from, and I know that I can give value to my clients with this. I don’t have to use magic fairy dust. I can be confident in [my practice].’

And of course, you’re going to get ethics, all the rest of it following from that. So you’ve got safety, effectiveness, all coming through from research.”

She’s been deeply curious for as long as she can remember.

“I must have been really terrible as a child because it must have been ‘Why?’ all the time!”

Her keen curiosity saw her become a chemist and have a successful career as a global research leader in natural science for 17 years, with roles including senior scientist at research centre, the Institute

of Food Research, in Norwich, UK.

So it’s no surprise that when she got involved in coaching, she wanted to address what she saw as a lack of an evidence base for coaching. In the early days of the profession, she was commissioned with David Lane by the CIPD to study organisational strategy for coaching.

The research, which included surveying some 40 organisations, was groundbreaking (*CIPD, 2006*) and hugely influential at a time when many potential sponsors still saw coaching as purely remedial or fluffy.

There was resistance, too, to investigating coaching from coaches themselves: “There was a great deal of pushback of, ‘Well, it’s the relationship [that matters] and if we go too far into that, it’ll all just disappear in a puff of smoke.’”

Her response was, “No, you could contribute [further] to the relationship and there are lots of other elements apart from the purely relational that will contribute [to the outcome].”





"[Then] we got less frightened of the relational with the work of Erik de Haan, for example. People were able to say, 'Yes, perhaps we can look at the relationship'."

Fillery-Travis has 18 years' experience researching coaching and its impact on individual and organisational development, authoring numerous books/academic and professional articles, and supervising many coaching Masters and doctoral students. Research themes have included return on investment of coaching and development of coaching cultures, doctoral supervision and developing pedagogy of practice research. Projects have included a review of evidence underpinning the Coaching Professional Competency framework, commissioned by the EMCC in 2017.

With so many significant contributions and impressive achievements under her belt, we might expect her to be serious. But she's not.

"I'm known for being really playful. I'll say to students things like, 'That's stonking', meaning good. The last thing on Earth I am is formal. It's usual for me to hug them, cry with them, all of it.

"As the Taoists would say, we take our practice seriously, but never ourselves."

## GETTING INTO COACHING

When she was working at the BBSRC Research Council Institute at Norwich Research Park, the HR department brought in a leadership development programme.

"We were all sure we didn't need it because we were professors! [But HR] knew that we weren't doing very well at the people management bit. We never had the tools.

"I had no idea what [the trainers, who were coaches] meant when they talked about what they were going to do with us, things like reflective practice. It just sounded like a whole lot of noise and I had no idea how it all fitted together. But we were put into learning sets and all the usual good stuff was done."

The experience was a catalyst in Fillery-Travis, shifting her career focus.

The coaches "were exquisitely playful, which rather disconcerted all of us. But [the process] made us see each other as humans and we started to see what our needs were.

"The light bulb went on. Of course, being a scientist, I got really involved and started to read [all about it].

"By that time, I'm 40 years old and I'm thinking, 'Actually, I've done my best work as a scientist'... so I rang up the company that had [worked with us] and asked them to help me get a job. They said, 'Oh, we'll have you'. And that's when the ball started rolling."

## SEEING POTENTIAL

Her early experiences in getting herself to university, without family support, but with the support of others who saw her potential, have fuelled her passion for coaching and other support.

"It really comes back to a persistent theme for me and why I do what I do. I left home when I was about 16. I got myself to university – I was the first person in my family to go.

"I had so little social capital, I didn't know the rules of the game.

"I've had some significant mentors throughout my life, including a teacher who took me in to live with her because I didn't have anywhere to stay. When you have this amount of investment in yourself from somebody else and real positive regard, and you see their impact on you and you really start to flourish, it's fascinating. I have been literally blessed with those mentors.

"It was absolutely pivotal. I had no idea how to do things and even how to make anything happen because there was no guidebook. This is the 1980s. You just stumbled from one thing to the other.

"I had a baby when I was doing my PhD because I had to do something different, didn't I? And the deans in this chemistry department bought my baby's buggy and high chair. It's that

thing of people coming through and really going beside you and saying, 'You could do this', that really made a huge impact on me when I was younger.

"I think this is why I think I'm an educator down to my little roots, my core, with a real passion for those who can't go by the normal route...[those] who haven't got everything that everybody else has. [Offering such support] has been a real joy.

"Coaching is the tool that is the most effective, plain and simple because you meet with somebody, not as, 'I'm going to fix this for you', but I believe in you sufficiently that I know you can do this, starts and it totally changes the game."

She shares how she attended University College, London (UCL) "purely by fluke":

"I had no idea it was the best university for what I wanted to do. It just was in London. I failed ridiculously on all of the other universities I'd applied for. I went to this one and I was interviewed by a really great guy, who later became a good friend of mine. He gave me an unconditional offer. I asked, 'Why did you do that?' He said, 'I knew you didn't have a hope in hell of getting the grades that we wanted. But I thought you'd be interesting.'

"So, yes I think it's been eagerness to learn, resilience, and that's why people, particularly the educators, who were around me were going, 'Oh, she's worth investing in'."

Fillery-Travis is inspired to extend such an approach to others, too, including through pro bono work, supporting youngsters who've committed a crime to return to their community with a clean record and suitable support. She received a civic award for this work in May 2006.

Young offenders "[usually] have just gone off the track a bit. There's so few people anywhere close to being evil.

"You can do some really good coaching there, teaching them resilience they can draw on, and who to go to and that they're part of the society





that we live in. Recidivism is relatively low when they have somebody walking beside them.”

She’s been the director of the UWTSD Doctoral College since 2021. She’s lead developer of the College in a pan-university project to provide a holistic doctoral provision for all level 8 students, and is currently offering researcher development provision for more than 500 doctoral students on DProf, ProfDoc and PhD programmes.

Before that, she was professor of the Wales Academy for Professional Practice and Applied Research (formerly Wales Institute for Work-based Learning) and its associated projects at the University of Wales Trinity St David, between 2017 and 2021. Between 2010 and 2017, she was associate professor at the Institute, and director of programmes and module leadership within the Doctorate in Professional Studies. She was responsible for overseeing the progression of 313 DProf candidates from a range of countries and the management of two DProf programmes with Ashridge Business School and the Metanoia Institute. She supervised 20 DProf candidates, and led the International Centre for the Study of Coaching, which sought to enhance the Institute’s role in professional and continuing education nationally and internationally.

Between 2004 and 2010, she was CEO of the Professional Development Foundation (PDF), a small not-for-profit research trust offering professional work-based masters degrees through validated partnership with the Institute for Work-Based Learning at Middlesex University. She helped develop the academic infrastructure to administer more than 50 distance learning students following a range of work-based MA/MSc and DProf programmes accredited by the Institute. She’s proud of “successfully transforming PDF from a ‘vanity enterprise’ to an effective learning institution where candidates and faculty were proud of their involvement”.

Prior to that, in 2008, she was seconded as senior consultant and programme director for the MA in Educational Leadership at the University of Manchester, overhauling the MA curriculum and developing a coaching offer to schools in Manchester and Liverpool, which is still going.

Her consultancy work has included designing an evaluation framework for the training and development programme of multinational Unilever, and training EMCC assessors for the coach training programme kite-marking initiative. She also has a private coaching practice.

When she got involved in running

masters programmes in coaching through PDF, she “was quite clear that although I come from positivism and natural sciences, the process design, the elements of how you do research and make it viable and appropriate are exactly the same.”

She was clear too that the research had to be practitioner-led: “You weren’t going to get commercial organisations wanting to invest at that point. We had to look at it ourselves, and so we had to do it with rigour.”

Much of her work continues to be developing coaches at masters and doctoral level.

“Usually they’re coming to me going, ‘This is really aggravating... I think we can do such and such with this.’ And I go, ‘Oh, that sounds fascinating. Shall we have a go?’ And they go off doing their thing. In all practitioner research, it has to be theirs. So [as supervisor] you have to lose your ego a bit.

The term ‘joint improvisation’ accurately describes the relationship for Fillery-Travis: “It’s when you’re looking at somebody researching their own practice and contributing to their own field, and you’re not the expert in the discipline – they usually are. You’re the expert in the process of development of knowledge within practice and academia. You know about the process of knowledge discovery. The two of you end up, in the best case, playing off each other, [exploring] the shared concern – their issue.”

It reminds her of jazz improvisation: “My partner’s got membership at [jazz club] Ronnie Scott’s. The musicians have that mutual appreciation of each other in the moment when one has done a bit, and you can see the other one who’s answering going, ‘Oh, nice. I’ll pick that one up.’ That’s how it always feels in a good conversation.”

## PRACTICE THEORY

“I think practice theory is such an exquisite idea and you see it in coaches when they’ve gone beyond the rule- ➔





following, [when] the model's gone out of the world ages ago. They're now into something co-produced in the moment... and during the course of making these changes and fitting them into their thing, they start developing new knowledge.

"Usually, they get a little bit of a niggle. I always say it's like a scratch in the inside of your skull. You go, 'If only I knew I could do this, or something about my client base is, they're showing this and I really want to help them more.'

"Practice theory says this happens all the way along the line, and it becomes your knowledge object. Most of the time these aren't simple and last a whole career. And it's a bit like the unflowering of a bloom.

"[Someone] said that the satisfaction achieved by professionals when they get one more step along the way is almost libidinal. I went, 'Yeah, you know what you mean'.

"I love seeing people on that journey really getting their feet and you know it's not the end but it's quite nice to nip it into a degree to tighten up things so the knowledge object gets to flourish a bit better.

"The quality of the questions [students explore] is really high" with examples of knowledge objects including why do people go to supervision, how to provide for clients on the spectrum, and what happens around trust during changes in ownership of a company.

"I'm terribly proud of my lot. I'm in awe of them. I've been really blessed with the people who've chosen to work with me on their work because their ideas have been phenomenal. The questions they've asked have prompted my questions. It's a joint enterprise, and we all learn. They're very close to my heart."

She's passionate about coaching being embraced more widely, including at higher levels. "There's really good stuff done organisationally

[coaching-wise] at the lower levels but the higher levels, relatively little. It's this sense that you can't be a coach and get things done, as one [board member] said to me once. And I was like, 'Really? As far as I can see, you can't get things done unless you are a coach!'"

She'd also like to see more coaching in arenas including health and wellbeing, and neurodivergence.

"Again, that's where coaching really comes into its own. You can do almost anything if you have the right people walking beside you. I think that's what my story says – you see yourself in others' eyes and that makes all the difference."

And having someone to offer support around wellbeing and resilience is very helpful, as she knows herself.

For Fillery-Travis, resilience ties in with kindness. "Kindness is one of my values. You can be with anything as long as you're kind. I've got a daughter and a sister I'm blessed with. I'm surrounded by kindness and respect.

"I'm trying to be kind. I'm not going to hold myself up as any paradigm of virtue. But I think when you've seen what problems can happen and also what can be sparked by inappropriate comments [it makes you kinder].

"When you have those experiences yourself, [you have] the idea of just how awful it can be, and how judgement closes people down and minimises their expectations and aspirations, etc. That it's beholden on us not to do this, and to ask, is it necessary? Correct? Kind?"

## TAOISM

Fillery-Travis is inspired by Taoism, which, she says, "doesn't force morality on you. It leaves it to you to make decisions [but] you have to be present in what you're doing. You can't turn around and go, I did nothing wrong, because actually, clearly you did because something's happened... You weren't present

to the moment in that decision.

"There's a [Taoist] concept of wu-wei, [often] translated as non-doing, but actually that's very much not the case. It's about the perfect time for action.

"Which I think comes back to coaching where you have the sense of the formation of the next action in a considered, quiet and fully aware state, which then makes the action almost happen by itself."

She cites a Taoist she read who said, 'We're only on this planet to learn'

"That had a profound effect on me."

## NEW THINGS

Fillery-Travis loves learning new things: "At present, I'm learning the alto saxophone and how to oil paint. One of my students said, 'Is there anything you can't do?' And I went, 'ice skating?' I'll try most things apart from that."

She feels blessed having her partner in her life: "He's the funniest guy in the world, an American band leader who's been in Wales for 25 years, Dr. Bruce Perkins." Like her, he's playful, informal.

Fillery-Travis regularly reads a quote from William Edward Gladstone: 'Be inspired with the belief that life is a great and noble calling, not a mean and grovelly thing that we are to shovel through as best we can, but an elevated and lofty destiny.'

"I love that. Lofty destiny. How cool is that? I like being noble. I can be noble, I think. 

## Reference

• D Lane, A Fillery-Travis and J Jarvis, *The Case for Coaching*, CIPD, 2006