



EMERALD POINTS

# COACHING FOR SOWL

Self-Other-World Learning in Global  
Education

**ANGELINA RODRÍGUEZ**



# COACHING FOR SOWL

Sometimes a book appears at the precise moment when it is most needed, and that is certainly the case with *Coaching for SOWL: Self-Other-World Learning in Global Education*. Recognizing a dearth of information available to support global educators' singular experience navigating the complex process of engaging with and learning from others, the author has created a model in which coaching invites global educators to use their intercultural skills to better understand themselves and their relation to the wider global community. At a time when difference is too often portrayed as threatening, this model invites global educators to consider how we make meaning about the world and integrate other ways of knowing, while we're also guiding students, faculty, and peers through their own transformational experiences. This alignment of coaching and global education is unique, accessible, and incredibly hopeful as a means for sustaining and enhancing global educators' personal and professional journeys.

—*Melissa Torres*, CEO, President + CEO,  
Forum on Education Abroad

# COACHING FOR SOWL

## Self-Other-World Learning in Global Education

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*Para Lalo. Desde el día que nos fuimos a Tepotzlán, has sido mi Otro más significativo y amado. Gracias por ser mi compañero en todo y por dejarme ser la tuya.*

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## FOREWORD

This work came into existence both very slowly and very quickly. On the one hand, it draws back over a lifetime of global education work and a theoretical obsession with what happens to people, cities, objects, and languages in encounters with difference. On the other hand, the time between deciding to write something on a summer afternoon in Amsterdam and completing the work on a winter night in Pennsylvania was incredibly short, effectively a semester. In a similarly time-bending way, the book includes both classic and emergent theory. I also wrote fully knowing things are changing so fast in higher education and the world that some ideas presented here may quickly become outdated. The book is situated in this complex moment, then, in multiple ways.

Like many who will read this, I was engaging in coaching work long before I had ever heard of such a thing and became a certified professional coach. Traces and incidents of coaching arise when we are working with students abroad to help them make meaning of an encounter or incident in a way that is truly engaged with who they are as human beings and what matters to them. We have coaching-esque conversations with international students when we find ourselves getting curious about their approach to managing family pressures and listening without offering advice, or when we help a study abroad student or staff member thoughtfully work out a solution to a challenge rather than solving it for them. As the book will show, the work of coaching is overtly pedagogical as it supports learning, and it is already familiar to many global educators in practice.

Coaching is a supportive move when we employ it with others, and we can use coaching inquiry on ourselves as well, but it is neither therapy nor a form of self-help. Writing about how we can help our students sustain the important work we educate them to take on, as well as thinking about the inner work we all need to do to better engage difference, can be challenging to do without edging into these discourses, even though I am versed in neither. That said, I have brought in some ideas that are not normally part of our discussions in global education to afford new ways of looking at our work. All to say, I've tried to strike the right balance between palatable and

weird, familiar and strange. And strangeness is just difference, after all, which is what our work is about.

Finally, this is not a research monograph. I don't explicitly mention even a fraction of what I've read, although the book is indebted to the work of many. I wanted the book to be short, potentially readable over an international flight, and I hope it will spark ideas for application.

May it serve en route.

# GRATITUDES

Gratitude at Lehigh University, to Vice President/Vice Provost for International Affairs, Cheryl Matherly for the space to take this on. To Eduardo Rodríguez, Betzy Sandoval, Bishop Pikinini, Jennifer Maxwell, and the 2024 Mandela Washington Fellows, along with myriad groups across campus, for participating in some applied experiments to integrate coaching in different modes. To nine semesters of students who've gone through my course on coaching and social change – gratitude for inspiring much of this work, with special thanks to Dulra Amolegbe for ongoing, impactful conversations and for letting me be a part of your process.

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At the Forum on Education Abroad, to Melissa Torres, CEO and President, and Marissa Lombardi, Vice President and Chief Learning Officer, deep thanks for some inspiring conversations that pushed my thinking forward during this time. Looking forward to more!

At Integral Coaching Canada, gratitude to my teachers Susan Loree, Jill Chitra, and Micheline Green. I have never experienced such intentional pedagogy in my life. Love as well to colleagues Kaylyn, Marti, and Steph; Joanna, Beth, and Josh; mentor-teachers Tiziana, Jody, Ginette, and Márcia; as well as to Amis, Cléo, and Chris. Thanks to all for incredible learning, absurd amounts of fun, and meaningful friendships.

At Evolution, to Meredith, Matthew, Miriam, and Frankie, and so many others for opening up new arenas of learning about coaching as a practice of profound transformation and for the opportunities to collaborate with you.

To clients from around the globe for letting me immerse into their lives and worldviews.

And at Emerald Publishing, warmest thanks to Charlotte Maiorana and Lydia Cutmore for making this such a delightful process, and to everyone else involved at Emerald as well.

To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most intimately and deeply begin.

bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

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# INVITATION TO THE VOYAGE

For many of us, global education is fundamentally about evolving toward a better future. As we strive to create what Charles Eisenstein (2013) has so evocatively named “the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible,” we find ourselves enmeshed in increasingly complex relational contexts that call on us to understand ourselves and others, as well as the planet and the other beings who inhabit it, in more open, inclusive ways.

For a long time, I’ve been pondering the following questions theoretically and practically:

- How can we encounter difference with increasing openness?
- What makes this so challenging for humans? What makes it challenging for *us* – global education professionals, students, and our other stakeholders – when we often choose our academic or professional paths precisely *because* they are imbued with opportunities to engage difference?
- How do we truly integrate the other ways of knowing and being that we make possible for students and others to encounter? How do we do this personally, professionally, and as a field?

The way we perceive ourselves, others, and the world shapes how we live our lives and how we make meaning. This way is structured, making some things available to us and some not. In other words, our cultural contexts, personal biographies, personalities and proclivities, experiences of power and history all come together in complex constellations that allow each of us to access other worldviews in distinct ways. As humans, however, we also have the capacity to evolve to greater consciousness. We can gently or radically transform our ways of being with ourselves, others, and the world and shift into entirely new paradigms and awareness.

The invitation we are currently being extended by the growing meta-crisis is to intentionally transform across these three dimensions. This then raises more questions:

- Given the demise we are witnessing of our current structures, systems, and paradigms, how do we support our students/emerging global leaders (as well as our teams and colleagues) as they face growing anxiety, overwhelm, hopelessness and burnout?
- How can we help them grapple with the paradoxical desire to belong to the same world they so fervently wish to change (i.e. make different)?
- What new hope and possibilities are emerging for our work in global education, and how can we cultivate the conditions for such a transformative shift?

While there are many ways for global education to address difference and contribute to social change, my contention in this book is that **coaching offers a uniquely appropriate modality for advancing our capacity to hear, hold, and engage with difference and to link personal and social transformation in an integrated manner.** Coaching serves us in our aim to empower and help sustain our constituents' contributions to the world.

How? Global education and coaching are both concerned with transformation. Both intend to expand self-awareness and open new ways of being in a world of others and a world undergoing unprecedented transitions. In global education, this often looks like learning to collaborate with others unlike oneself and to embrace a concern for the greater good. In coaching, this is about making visible habitual thoughts and responses, widening the repertoire of choice, and making possible new ways of showing up with oneself and others.

This book brings these two arenas together. Combined with an overt focus on difference and contextualized within our field, coaching is presented as an experience and pedagogical approach that global education professionals can mobilize in their work with study abroaders, international interns, international students, staff, and other constituents.

What coaching offers, and what I draw out in this work, is as follows:

- a set of perspectives and capacities that enhance our intercultural skill set;
- a means to consider difference from a wider perspective;
- ways to hold self and other in a nonpolarized manner;
- an understanding of how transformation occurs at the personal and social levels;
- paths to cultivate the conditions that support this sort of transformation;

- a focus on how learning can be integrated;
- a metaview into our field and what might be next.

**Coaching for Self-Other-World Learning (SOWL)** (pronounced “soul”), the approach I’ve created, essentially invites us to turn our intercultural skills – suspending judgment, being curious, listening and so on – back onto the individual. This turning inward permits increased self-awareness which then foments new ways to engage difference now on difference’s terms (i.e. neither losing oneself nor forcing the assimilation of the other). This can happen with an individual, a cohort of learners, larger systems, or the world. Coaching can be broadly applied to our field, pedagogically incorporated into programs or employed in relationships with staff and students.

Through a coaching approach specifically centered around opening to difference, we can (1) support our stakeholders (students, faculty/staff, other participants and partners) so that they can sustain their important global work; (2) promote increased capacity to be with others; and (3) as a field, evolve from a focus on an interconnected world (interdependent parts of a whole) to an integrated one (a collective whole that includes diversity).

#### A BRIEF SKETCH: COACHING AND ITS ALIGNMENT WITH GLOBAL EDUCATION

The next chapter will explore coaching in depth, but briefly, coaching can be understood in multiple ways:

- It can refer to an intimate *relationship and process* between a coach and a client in which the coach serves as thought partner, listener, and provocateur in support of the client’s transformation and greater fulfillment.
- At a smaller scale, it can signal a particular type of *conversation* in which one person is listening and inquiring in such a way that the other comes to their own clarity about an issue, commitment or next step.
- It can also reference a larger cultural way of being. A coaching *culture* is focused on development and learning attuned to the larger context(s) at hand, highly open and, ideally, deeply embodied and integrated among the members involved.

At any of these levels, coaching makes visible new choices and expands our repertoire of how to be and to act with and for one another, challenging and expanding our existing ways of moving through the world.

Coaching already aligns with what we do in higher education in general and in global education specifically.

- (1) Coaching provides an anchoring refuge for thoughtful reflection and learning that catalyzes applied action, **like a university, or an onsite study abroad program office, or a peer-led circle for international students.** A university, for example, creates intimate, offstage spaces where students can learn, reflect, and discuss. This happens in classrooms, through advising, in residential experiences or otherwise. A university also pushes students out to *do things* with the learning and to learn through application. Despite current critiques of higher education, we have left much of the ivory tower era behind: higher education in the United States is increasingly experiential, practical, applied, and engaged with the world beyond campus. To this end, institutions of higher education (study abroad providers, site staff) carefully calibrate support and challenge, inviting in and sending out to try new things and act. Coaches do exactly this: solicit reflection, challenge and support, draw in, send out.
- (2) Coaching also involves a process and method for developing self-awareness, uncovering one's blind spots, and questioning one's assumptions while always simultaneously honoring someone's innate wisdom or knowledge. This sounds a lot **like Freirean critical pedagogy.**
  - Critical pedagogy sees students (others) as experts and knowers about their personal experiences and intellectual areas. A coach also views each client as an expert on themself.
  - Freirean educators rely on generative themes, in other words those interests, queries, and desires that emerge from the learners versus an imposed (often colonial) curriculum. Similarly, a coach follows the client's self-identified concerns without imposing an agenda or goal.
  - In critical pedagogy, knowledge is co-created between the teacher and learner who both bring expertise and ignorance into dialogue. This dovetails neatly with coaching's emphasis on co-creating a relationship, a process and outcomes.

- Critical pedagogy is concerned with social justice and transforming the status quo. The coaching theories and practices I follow are concerned with social transformation as well.
  - In critical pedagogy, learning is explicitly linked to liberation. Coaching also liberates a client from their own limited views about themselves and what they are capable of (which may be rooted in power structures, racism and the like); from how they habitually relate to others (which may stem from family or larger systemic patterns) and from how they may currently look at and experience the world (which relates to all of this and cultural orientations). As consciousness expands, liberation becomes possible, and a client's sphere of influence and action grows as well.
- (3) Finally, **like global immersive experiences**, coaching offers a means to immerse into someone else's realities, to develop empathy, and to see from an other person's perspective. This will be explored in the chapters ahead. My premise is that if we can journey into a new reality abroad or away from campus, learn to see patterns, understand values, and discern other ways of knowing and proceeding, we can also move back down from this cultural or social level to the individual before us and become interested in questioning how *they* are seeing and doing things in equally patterned ways. We can begin to see and hear more difference, evoking learning about ourselves and others, thus permitting new ways of relating. This can be profoundly transformative.

The terrain that coaching traverses is, thus, not exactly unfamiliar to global educators. What this book will show is that coaching can be harnessed as a pedagogical method (a way of thinking about and cultivating learning) at varying scales and points of application.

#### THE NEED FOR THE INNER WORK TO SUPPORT THE OUTER WORK

Socially-minded students who will become the world's next professionals and leaders are actively engaged with the largest global issues (the wicked problems, the grand challenges). They are committed to things larger than their individual well-being. We know, however, that as inspiring and purpose-driven as students are, many are overwhelmed and anxious. They are worried about the climate; they face migration issues or deportation fears for themselves or family members; they are coming of age in a racial reckoning that has far to go; and

they worry about the decline of democracy and the rise of war, among myriad other things. We are also all aware of the mental health crisis on US campuses, especially post-pandemic, and we see these trends showing up in global learning sites among our different constituents.

In a quote not directed toward academia or students but highly applicable to both, Otto Scharmer and Eva Pomeroy states that the biggest challenge at hand is a growing sense of helplessness:

*The number one problem facing humanity today is not climate change or inequality or war. It is not the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI). Rather, it is our sense that we are powerless to change any of it. The old ways of knowing and acting in our world are no longer sufficient. Our systems are collapsing. If we are going to serve societal transformation in the face of this collapse, as we believe is fully possible, we need to draw on a new form of knowing – knowing for transformative action. (2024, p. 20)*

To take action in new ways requires learning to also “be” in new ways. Beyond and including academia, we are witnessing a growing collective shift that recognizes the need for inner growth work among leaders, whether emerging or existing. The inner work matters for at least three reasons:

- (1) *For sustainability.* In a VUCA context (a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) and a PAID context (“an environment of relentless pressure, being always on, with information overload, and distraction” [Stacy & Reilly, 2019, p. 109]), burnout is rampant. We cannot educate the next generation simply assuming that content and tools will be enough for them to sustain their work on issues far larger than one individual’s reach over the long haul. Attention to the person behind the work must be part of our curriculum, and the challenges our stakeholders face should not be relegated to student affairs or therapists, nor pushed under the bed until midlife crises hit or people quit, as we witnessed en masse in the post-pandemic period. It is imperative to take the inner experience of experiential learning and action seriously.
- (2) *For our relationships.* Who you are is how you move in the world. Clarity around one’s ways of being and doing is essential as we come into constant contact with those unlike us. As Thomas Merton (1971) so eloquently states,

*Those of us who attempt to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening our own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. We will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of our own obsessions, our aggressivity, our ego-centered ambitions, our delusions about ends and means. (pp. 178–179)*

We know that how students and facilitators show up in study abroad, in internship sites or for field research, matters immensely.

- (3) *For social change.* The inner work is tied directly to systems change concerns; it is not one or the other. As Bill O'Brien, former CEO of Hanover Insurance, is oft-quoted, "The success of an intervention depends on the inner condition of the intervener." To say this in reverse, we are the instrument of our work, which means the instrument needs to be in good condition and tuned. This area is fast attracting attention in the systems change world as researcher Erin Alexiuk underlines: "As the systems change field has grown, a tacit consensus has emerged around the need for inner work to effectively intervene in, and ultimately transform, complex systems" (2022, p. 16).

In short, we cannot change the world without considering the inner world of its inhabitants.

From this perspective, it is easy to think of coaching as catering to the most intimate and local part of *think globally/act locally*. To change or challenge the world and to support or empower others, i.e. do anything exterior, you must be able to change and challenge, support, and empower the interior.

Of course, the outer work is equally essential. This is not an argument to change sides (i.e., to shift focus from action to self-exploration); it is ultimately about incorporating the individual and interior work with the collective and exterior work and not seeing them as separate. After all, joy and well-being exist at the intersection of personal, interpersonal, and social levels. This book simply shines a light on the need to look at the inner work that is too often relegated to an afterthought in many conversations about global learning.

As Buddhist monk and writer Thich Nhat Hahn says, "*harmonie chez soi, joie dans le monde.*" Harmony within, joy in the world. As within, without.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK: A MAP OF THE TERRAIN

**Part I: Conceptual Frameworks** present the foundational ideas that inform the Coaching for SOWL approach.

A coach immerses themselves into a client's world in a way that is similar to how a student might immerse into a new cultural context. **Chapter One: From Immersing in Place to Immersing into Someone Else's World** introduces the parallels between global immersive experiences and coaching engagements, drawing out how both processes involve immersing oneself into an unknown context and uncovering patterns, beliefs, and assumptions. It then provides an overview of coaching, offering some initial framings and distinctions between coaching and advising, mentoring, or therapeutic counseling. From here, I draw out similarities between global education's intercultural skills and coaching skills. While this makes coaching familiar, I also introduce where coaching adds powerful nuances to our existing skill sets which can help us to refine our practice and evolve to meet the times at hand.

**Chapter Two: Engaging Difference: From Global Education to Coaching** plunges us into difference, one of our core "why's" in global education. This is the first framing that underwrites the SOWL approach and further anchors coaching into our field. It gets us into why difference is so hard for humans to engage, even for global educators and learners who explicitly and repeatedly seek it out. After considering traditional understandings of how we encounter otherness and the problematic nature of the terms culture shock and cultural barrier, I reference less common ways to conceptualize difference which invites us to move outside of the self/other (sameness/difference) polarity in which we tend to function. Coaching is presented as a uniquely everyday space in which we can facilitate a connection within diversity. Understood this way, coaching provides a simple and sophisticated means to extend radical hospitality toward another and to welcome difference without needing to change it.

Global signifies two things: *world*, which is where global education tends to focus, and *holistic/related to the whole*, which is where our next evolution may be pulling us. **Chapter Three: Evoking Wholeness: an Integral Approach to Coaching as Pedagogy** asks how we might access someone's world and create the conditions for learning. The approach outlined here relies upon a specific approach to coaching and model of transformation, which translates into a method for evoking learning. In the final section, I draw out the highly pedagogical nature of coaching which prepares us to apply coaching in our work. Combined with our explicit concern for difference, the coaching concepts and methods presented in this chapter lay the foundation for the Coaching for SOWL approach.